



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

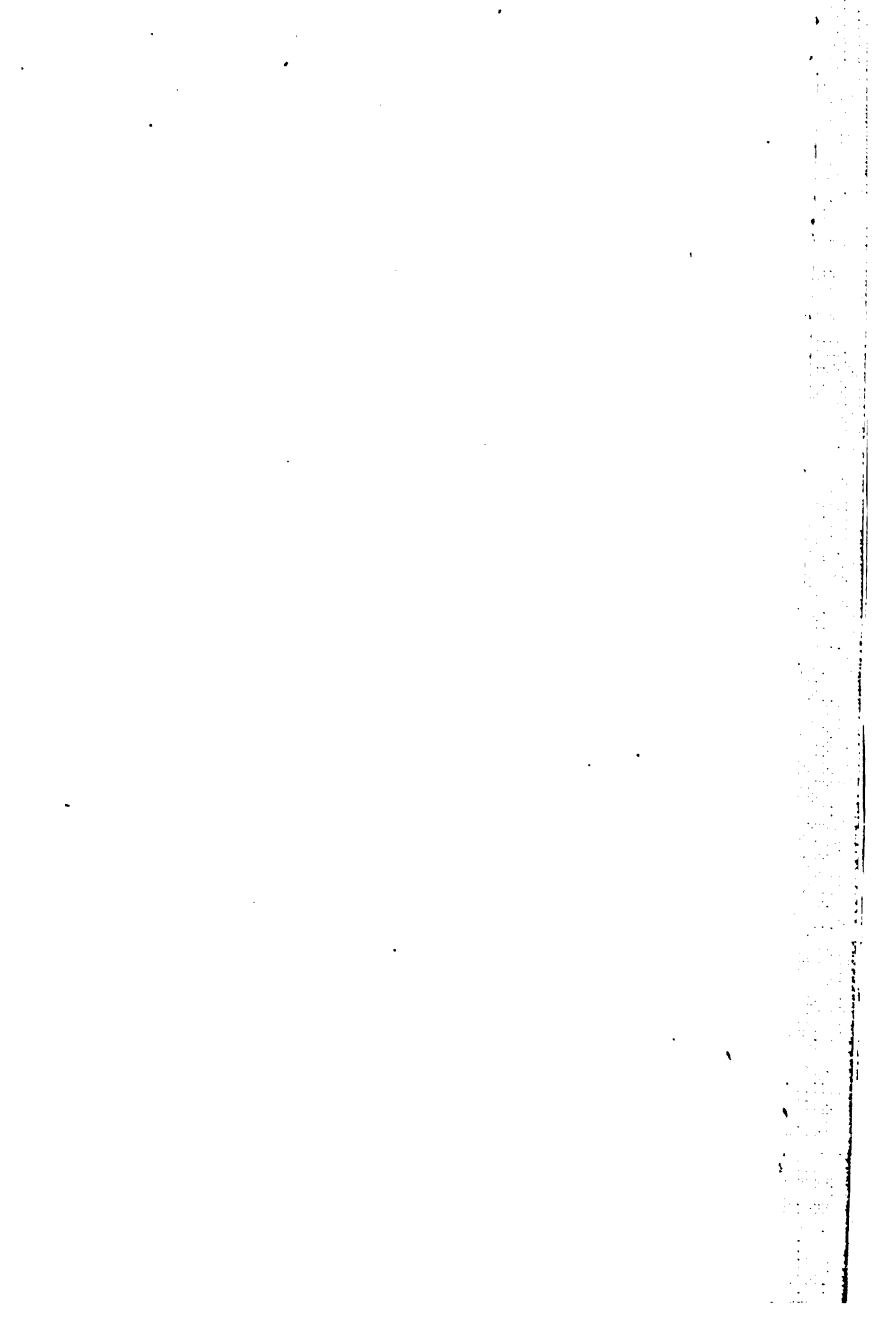
- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

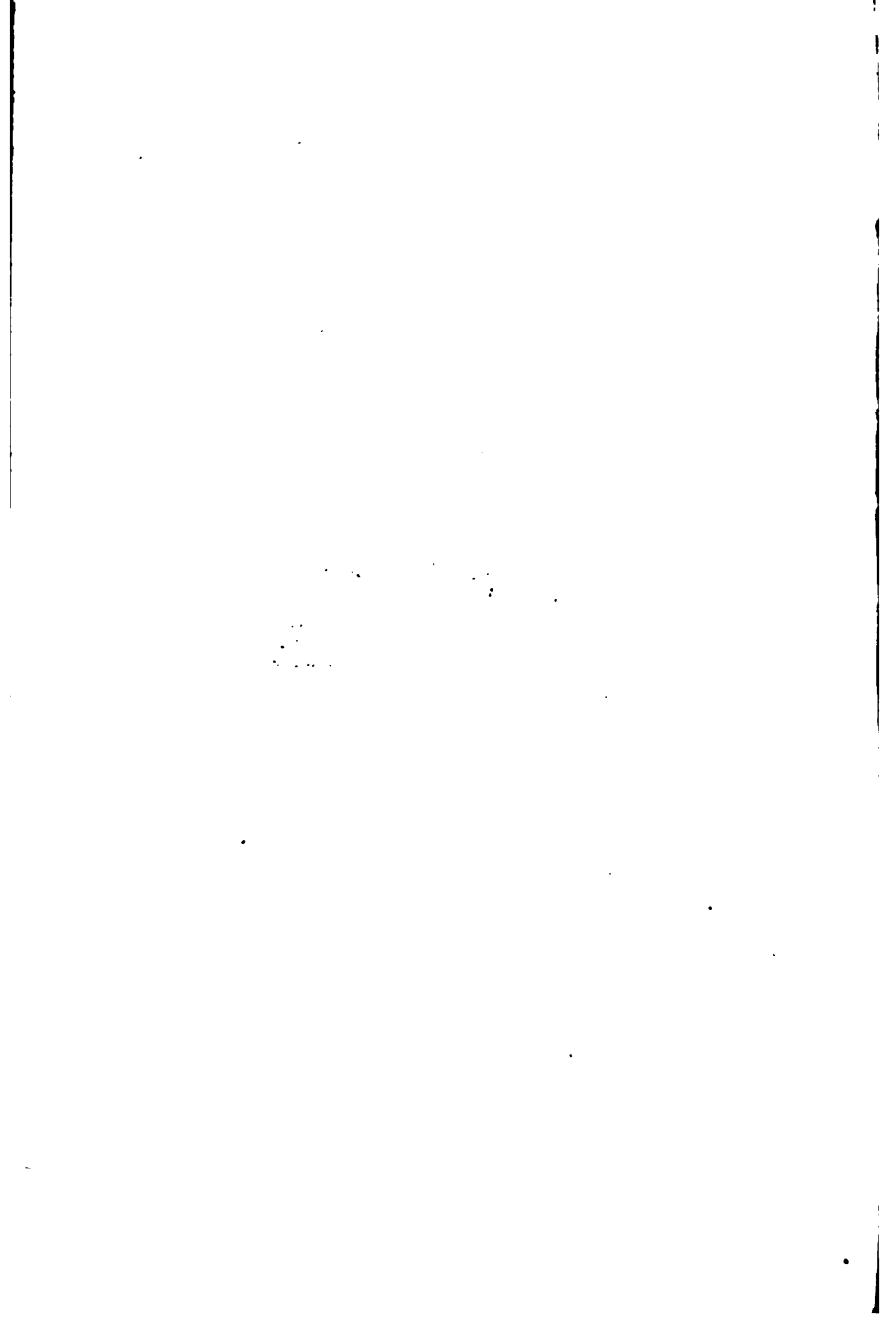
Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



Haines
W.E.



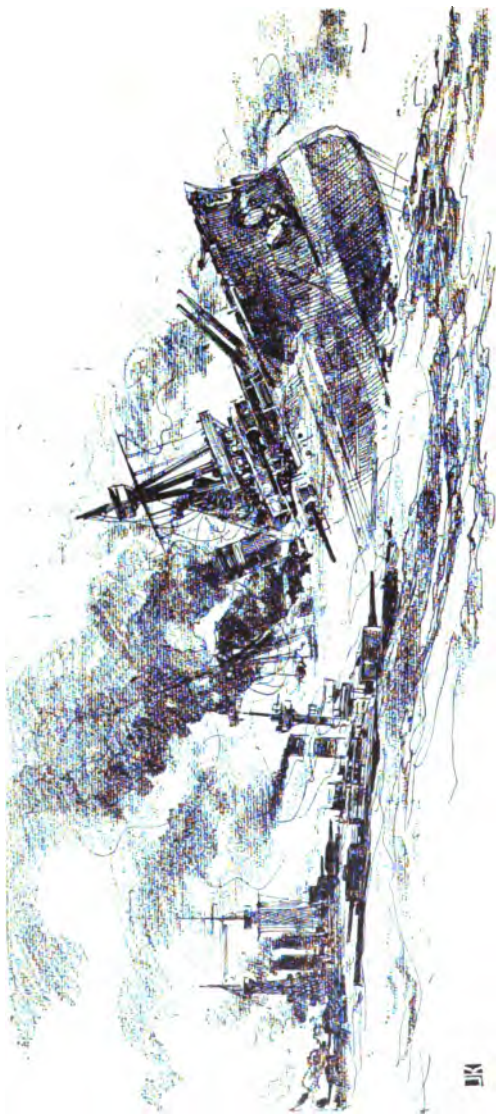




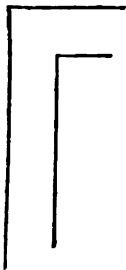
THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

NAS



ONE ROARING EXPLOSION AFTER ANOTHER SPLIT THE AIR AND BATTLE-SHIP AND MONITOR PLUNGED
DOWN TOGETHER [See page 224]



• •

•

•

[See page 224
AND MONITOR PLUNGED

CLEARING THE SEAS

OR THE
LAST OF THE WARSHIPS

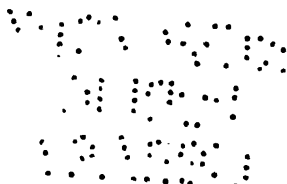
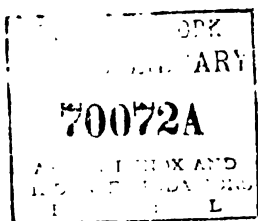
BY
DONAL HAMILTON HAINES

AUTHOR OF "THE LAST INVASION"

ILLUSTRATED



HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON



CLEARING THE SEAS

Copyright, 1915, by Harper & Brothers
Printed in the United States of America
PUBLISHED OCTOBER, 1915

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	AN INTERVIEW	1
II.	THE POSTER	6
III.	ON THE SEA-RANGE	10
IV.	THE ALARM	19
V.	WAR!	24
VI.	AT WASHINGTON	29
VII.	THE GREAT STORM	35
VIII.	THE SMOKE-PLUMES	46
IX.	THE FIRST BLOWS	50
X.	THE WOUNDED GIANT	55
XI.	THE DEFEAT OF THE "ALASKA"	62
XII.	CAPTURED	70
XIII.	WATCHING THE INVADERS	78
XIV.	THE ESCAPE	87
XV.	OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN	96
XVI.	THE DUCK-HUNTER'S LAUNCH	102
XVII.	THE TORPEDO-BOAT	109
XVIII.	THE BLUE COLOSSUS	120
XIX.	THE ORDEAL	126
XX.	GUESSING AT THE TRUTH	134
XXI.	THE CANAL	140
XXII.	A BREATHING-SPACE	150
XXIII.	BACK HOME!	155

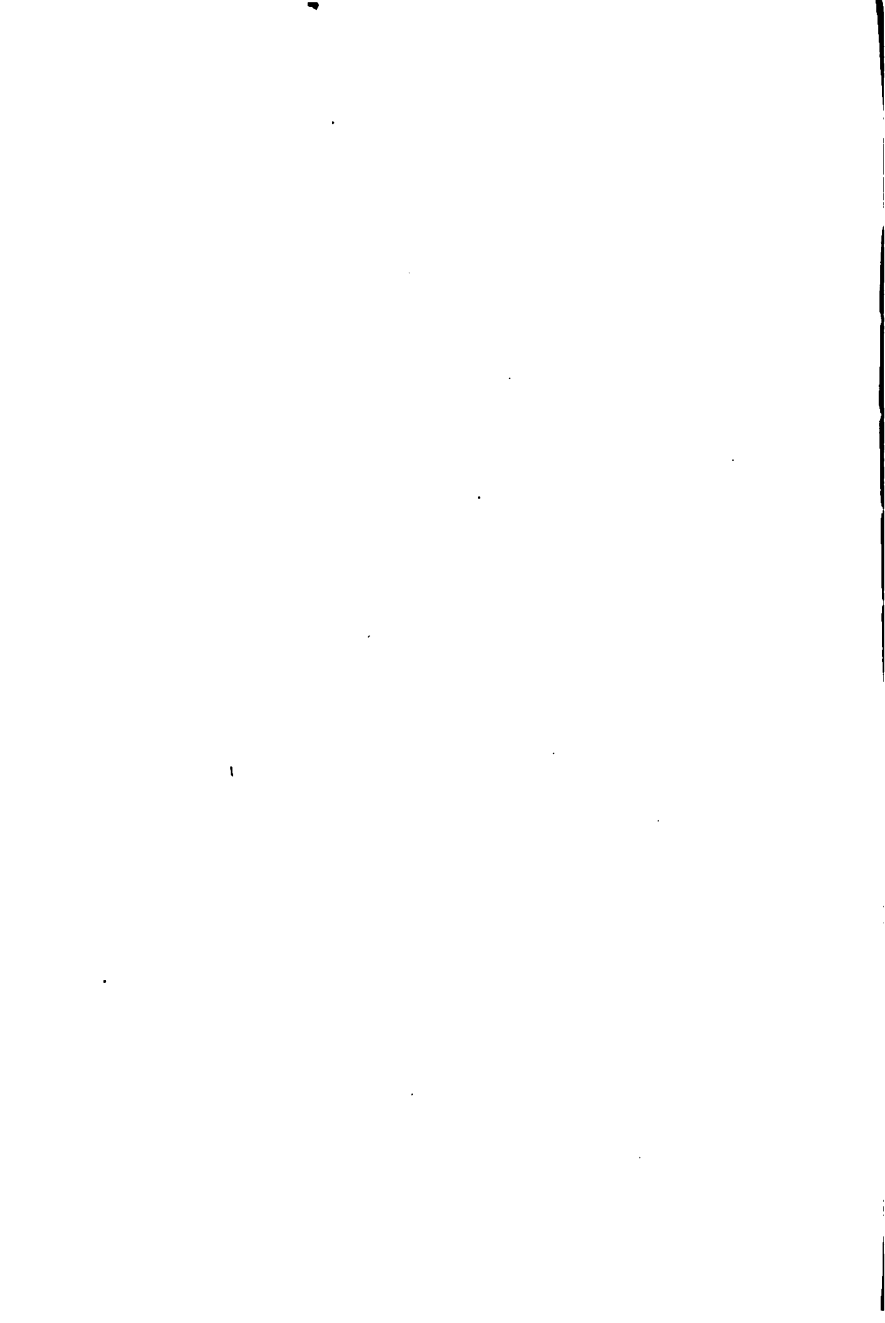
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
XXIV.	SUBMARINE "X"	160
XXV.	BENEATH THE WAVES	167
XXVI.	FAILURE!	175
XXVII.	NEWS FROM THE LAND	182
XXVIII.	THE GATHERING OF THE SHIPS	187
XXIX.	SAVE NEW YORK!	193
XXX.	THE PANIC	207
XXXI.	THE RESCUE	213
XXXII.	TRIUMPH!	225
XXXIII.	THE SOUTHERN FIGHT	228
XXXIV.	THE NEW PHASE	235
XXXV.	THE "BOLTURA"	242
XXXVI.	"STOLE AWAY!"	250
XXXVII.	A FAMILIAR FACE	254
XXXVIII.	THE BEGINNING OF THE END	259
XXXIX.	THE FORLORN HOPE	268
XL.	THE SURRENDER	273
XLI.	MR. SHARPE CONFESSES	277

ILLUSTRATIONS

ONE ROARING EXPLOSION AFTER ANOTHER SPLIT THE AIR AND BATTLE-SHIP AND MONITOR PLUNGED DOWN TOGETHER	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"MEN, I HAVE TO TELL YOU THAT A STATE OF WAR NOW EXISTS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE BLUES"	<i>Facing p.</i> 26
JOE AND TED ALMOST PLUNGED INTO A GROUP OF BLUE INFANTRYMEN	" 94
A BRIGHT, YELLOW LIGHT SUDDENLY OPENED ALMOST STRAIGHT IN FRONT OF HIM . . .	" 118
STRAIGHT IN FRONT OF THEM A FAINT, GREENISH- WHITE GLOW APPEARED ON THE HORIZON .	" 138
DARTING, TWISTING. DIVING DEEPER INTO THE BLACK DEPTHS, THE TWO SUBMARINES PLAYED THEIR FEARFUL GAME	" 172
A HUGE BALL OF BLUE BUNTING ROSE FROM THE BRIDGE AND BEGAN TRAVELING UP THE HALYARDS TO THE FORETOP	" 202
THE "PORTO RICO" SWUNG HER TWELVE "FOUR- TRENS" FROM THE RUINED BATTLE-SHIP TO A BIG ARMORED CRUISER	" 216



CLEARING THE SEAS

I

AN INTERVIEW

JOE LAWTON sat uncomfortably on a hard chair in the office of his uncle, Stephen Sharpe, and tried to meet the keen stare of the blue eyes behind the flashing nose-glasses which were peering at him over the side of the desk.

Mr. Sharpe was a small, lean man with a voice like his name, a brown, wrinkled skin, and a manner which seemed to say that he had something very important waiting for him, and wished you would hurry as much as possible. Joe, who had never before seen his uncle, did not like him at all, and felt that he never would learn to.

"Never done any work, have you, Joe?" inquired Mr. Sharpe.

"No, sir," admitted Joe.

"Humph!" said Mr. Sharpe. "Thought not."

It seemed to Joe that a young fellow who had lost home, parents, and everything in a terrible

CLEARING THE SEAS

disaster which had almost wiped out an entire city deserved a little more sympathy at the hands of the only relative he had in the world, and what little liking he had for Mr. Sharpe vanished at his uncle's words.

"Then what *have* you done?" persisted the man at the desk.

Joe gave him some idea of what his life had been. It had never struck him that his life had differed greatly from that of the other boys he had known, but as he talked under the steady stare of those spectacled blue eyes he began to wish that he had done a few different things with his time. When Joe had finished talking Mr. Sharpe rose from his chair, strode across the room, and stood staring out of the window, his back to his nephew. After a few seconds he swung round abruptly.

"You don't like me very well, do you, Joe?" he demanded.

"Why—" began Joe; but Mr. Sharpe did not let him finish.

"Of course you don't," he hurried on, "and you've no particular reason to. Well, I'm going to make you think even less of me. Just what did you think I'd do for you—eh?"

"I thought perhaps you'd help me," answered Joe.

"Help you? I will. But you won't think so. You'll think I'm an old brute. I could get you a dozen good positions by turning over my hand—

AN INTERVIEW

but you sha'n't have any of them. I'll put no man into a place until I know him, nephew or no nephew. You haven't had the sort of bringing-up that I like. You've had too much play and money and too little work. You've learned to take too many things for granted—things that most lads your age don't know anything about.

"Now, I'm not going to let you starve. I'm going to give you enough money to live on every month. You won't think it's enough, but I've lived on less, and I know. Then I'm going to let you shift for yourself for a year. This is February. You come to me a year from next March and let me see what you've made of yourself.

"It's no easy thing. I know that. I don't believe in easy things. And I want to know the stuff in you. If you can't make a go of it, you come back to me any time and I'll do just what your father and mother would have done. I'll send you to college, maybe give you a year in Europe, and get you a job at some desk where in time you'll earn twenty-five hundred a year, play golf, get fat, and drive a red automobile. Got any money?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Sharpe peeled five ten-dollar bills from a thick packet and handed them to Joe.

"There's your start," he said. "That 'll last a month. At the end of that time let me know your address and I'll send you enough more,"

CLEARING THE SEAS

He paused and scribbled an instant on the blotter before him. "If you haven't got the nerve to tackle it," he said, suddenly, "we'll start that red automobile business now!"

Joe got out of his seat and stuffed the roll of bills into his pocket. There was a lump in his throat, and the hot tears were close to his eyes, but his voice was steady.

"I'll take that money," he said, "but if I can help it I won't take another penny of yours. And the only thing that will make me show myself to you at the end of a year will be to prove that I'm not quite such a good-for-nothing as you think me!"

Mr. Sharpe started to speak, then checked himself and turned to his desk. Had Joe been able to see his face he could have seen his uncle's straight mouth twist a little at the ends in a grim smile.

"I'll look for you in thirteen months!" Mr. Sharpe said in the tone he might have employed in speaking to one of his traveling-men.

Joe walked to the door in a sort of daze. He had come to Chicago rather diffidently in answer to his uncle's wire, but his worst fears had not conjured up any such cold-blooded reception as this. He had not believed that such things actually happened. He had almost reached the door when his uncle stopped him.

"Joe!" he called.

Joe stopped. Mr. Sharpe came up and put a

AN INTERVIEW

hand on his shoulder. It was not exactly an affectionate gesture, but rather the little man's way of emphasizing his words.

"I'm hitting you pretty hard," he admitted, "and you probably think I'm hitting below the belt. I'm going to ask you to remember just one thing. Your mother was my sister, and I thought more of her than any one else in the world."

A minute later Joe was shouldering his way through the crowded street with bitter anger in his heart and fifty dollars in his pocket with which to begin his fight against a world of which he knew very little.

II

THE POSTER

THE alarm-clock in the front room on the third floor of Mrs. Jackson's dingy boarding-house whirred noisily. Joe Lawton tumbled out of bed and began climbing into his clothes. Ted Brandt, his room-mate, yawned prodigiously, stretched, and sat up.

"Nowhere to get, but up!" he exclaimed. "Nothing to do but work!"

Joe nodded. "Just about," he agreed, pulling on his shirt.

Four months had passed since he had walked out of Mr. Sharpe's office, and in that time Joe had learned more of the business of life than in all the previous years of his existence. He had learned the meaning of hard work. For the past six weeks he had been earning twelve dollars a week as a plumber's helper. Before that he had been an office-boy (although several sizes too large) and had driven a milk-wagon.

It never entered Joe's head that he was going to be a plumber all his life. But he had found that the busy world does not give a young fellow

THE POSTER

much time to pick and choose. He would not call on his uncle for more money, he had to earn money to live, and jobs of the sort he would have preferred were not to be had for the asking.

He and Ted Brandt had been thrown together in the outer office of a big wholesale concern where both were applying for work. Ted, a big, red-haired farm-boy from Minnesota, had come to Chicago to make "his fortune"—and he was not getting ahead much faster than Joe. The same hard necessity had driven him to take such work as he could get, and he was now spending eight hours a day in front of a lathe in a machine-shop.

The two had exchanged confidences, and each knew the other's story from beginning to end. Ted had heartily applauded Joe's determination to take no money from his uncle, and not to call on him at the end of the year.

Yet each was dissatisfied, not because he was afraid of work or lacked confidence in his own ability, but because the work they were doing was not the kind that would get them anywhere. But to give up the few dollars a week they earned while they looked for work of another sort meant to face actual want, and that is a step at which any man hesitates.

"A bird in the hand may be worth two in the bush," Ted said once as they were discussing their situation, "but it's a mighty poor pair of birds you and I have, Joe."

"I know it," admitted Joe, "but I hate to let

CLEARING THE SEAS

this one get away while I'm chasing the two in the bush!"

They hurried through their breakfast and swung off down the street to work together. Neither had much to say, and they had walked several blocks in silence when Ted remarked, pointing to the brightly colored poster in front of a naval recruiting-office on the other side of the street:

"We might try that, Joe!"

Ted spoke in fun, but Joe stopped and started across the street.

"Let's have a look," he said.

They studied the poster together. The poster contained the picture of a husky-looking young fellow in sailor costume, waving a flag from the bridge of a big war-ship. In the background was a stirring view of huge battle-ships and blue water. Beneath the picture were set forth the advantages of serving three years in the navy.

"I'll go you!" Joe said, suddenly.

"What!" exclaimed Ted.

"I mean it," answered Joe. "I'll do it if you will."

Afterward, Joe often wondered what he would have done had Ted said "no." But before Ted had time to speak a brown-faced sailor came out of the stairway leading to the recruiting-office and laid a hand on Ted's shoulder.

"Come in if you're interested," he said, with a good-natured grin, "and I'll tell you some more."

THE POSTER

An hour later the two walked down the stairs to the street, drew long breaths, and looked at each other. They had signed the necessary papers, passed the physical examinations, and been accepted. And each had signed his name, binding himself to serve the government of the United States for a period of three years.

"Well," Joe said, "it 'll be better than cutting pipe and smearing myself from head to foot with lard-oil!"

"And we won't have to eat any more of Mrs. Jackson's hash!" Ted reminded him.

That afternoon Mr. Stephen Sharpe received the first communication he had had from his nephew. The letter contained a single line which read:

"I have joined the navy," and was signed with Joe's name.

Mr. Sharpe dropped the letter with a sharp exclamation, and reached for the telephone which stood on his desk. Then he let his hand fall and leaned back in his chair.

"I may be a fool," he said, grimly, "and I may be making the big mistake of my life—but I'm going to let him go."

III

ON THE SEA-RANGE

THE great steel ships of the Atlantic Fleet had reached the target-range several hundred miles east of the Virginia capes. For over a month the fleet had been on the southern drill-grounds, going through the annual manoeuvres. There had been drills, drills, drills of every sort, tests of engines and machinery, inspections, until the men dreamed of them, and then, to keep the men from getting "stale" on the eve of the real serious business, "Sports Week," during which the crews and officers of the different ships were pitted against one another in all sorts of trials of skill afield and afloat.

And now the ships were on "the range" for the actual target practice with the great 14-inch guns. The rivalry between the different ships, and even between the crews of the different guns, was intense, and for days the men had done nothing but talk of the approaching struggle.

On the gun-deck of the new dreadnought *Alaska*, Joe Lawton and Ted Brandt, off duty at

ON THE SEA-RANGE

the time, sat discussing the chances of No. 2 forward 14-inch turret.

Almost a year of service had wrought great changes in the pair. Both of them had broadened and their muscles had grown. They were tanned deep brown, and they wore their "blues" as though they had never worn anything else in their lives.

"What would you have said a year ago if I'd told you that we'd be here to-day?" Ted asked.

Joe shook his head. "Don't know," he answered, "but I'm glad we did it."

"So am I," agreed Ted.

"We aren't getting any better pay than we were," Joe went on, "and we're working harder. But, somehow, it seems to count more. There's something fine about just being on a ship like this and being a part of it."

"What do you think about re-enlisting?" Ted asked.

"I don't know," answered Joe. "But I'm not worrying about that. If I leave the navy in two years I can tackle things better for having served. I know that. But what bothers me is this—can we beat that turret-crew on the *Minnesota*? They made ten hits out of eleven shots last year."

And in an instant the two were as thoroughly engrossed in the discussion of the turret's chances of victory as the oldest veterans of the crew.

Their eight months on the training-ship, where a grizzled old boatswain's mate had whipped a

CLEARING THE SEAS

dozen "rookies" from raw landsmen into sailors, had fairly made seamen of them. Luckily, both of them had been assigned to the *Alaska*, the newest and most powerful ship of the navy. Their hammocks swung side by side, and both were members of the same gun-crew, although Ted was in the turret proper, while Joe served in the handling-room—the steel chamber beneath the turret where the shells and powder-bags are lifted from the cars that trolley them from the magazines, and placed on the ammunition-hoists which lift them to the breeches of the great guns above.

That night every man in the fleet went to bed almost as soon as hammocks had been "piped down," although they were not required to go until "taps" sounded. Every man wanted to be fresh for the hard work ahead of them. Ted and Joe talked in whispers for a time, then rolled over in their hammocks and went to sleep.

Bright and early the next morning, in response to signals from the Admiral's flag-ship, the *Texas*, the ships of the fleet cleared for action.

Joe had never seen the ship actually stripped for firing before, and he had hardly realized what havoc the mere jar of firing from the huge guns might work. Stanchions, davits, railings were removed and stowed away, boats were hoisted to the boat-deck and secured, "battle-hatches" were closed and made fast, and all glassware, china, electric-light bulbs, and such breakable things

ON THE SEA-RANGE

were stowed away. Even the swinging tables at which the crew ate were stowed away and chalked with a big "O," which meant that they would be thrown overboard in actual fighting, for flying splinters of wood are about as dangerous as the shells themselves.

Down in the hot handling-room, Joe got little idea of the work on the range during that long day. He and his companions of the handling-room crew had their work cut out for them, and while it was not as spectacular as that of the gun-crews above their heads, it was just as important.

The men, stripped to the waist, waited, talking in low tones. The officer in charge stood at one side, nervously writing in a note-book. Only the throb of the engines told them that the ship was in motion. They were as thoroughly isolated from the rest of the crew by the steel walls as though they had been a hundred miles away.

Waiting was hard work. Joe and the rest of the men knew their work as thoroughly as weeks of hard drill could pound it into them; but they knew, too, the precious seconds that a single slip would cost.

For a long ten minutes nothing happened. The hoists, lowered into the handling-room, were already loaded with the great 1,500-pound shells and the powder charges in canvas bags. The men stood about, waiting.

From above came a muffled explosion, a shock as though the ship had been struck by a tremen-

CLEARING THE SEAS

dous club, then, after a slight pause, another jar. The gunner's mate in charge of the handling-room nodded and a slight smile showed under his little mustache.

"Now, boys!" he said.

With a clang the huge steel plates which shut off the handling-room from the turret swung open, the electric motor was started, and the two hoists, each one directly behind one of the guns, clanked upward.

From the turret came the hiss of compressed air as powerful jets were forced through the guns, driving out the gases which might otherwise have blown back into the steel chamber of the turret and stifled the men.

During the few seconds that the trap was open, Joe found time to glance up. In the light of the shaded battle-lanterns he caught a fleeting view of moving figures, and the white-clad legs of the man on the sighting-platform. Scraps of words came down to him.

"Range—eight six—o—four. Sixty!" This from a man who stood with a telephone at his ear, repeating to the sight-setters the corrections in range, snapped out from the 14-inch sub-station, deep down in the heart of the ship, as fast as they could be sent down by the men aloft who were watching the flight of each shell.

He even heard Brown, the trainer, call across to the gun-pointer, "High, Bill; I told you we were high!"

ON THE SEA-RANGE

Then, just as the steel jaws of the door clanged shut, the gruff voice of Pat Kelly, the turret captain, bellowed, "Faster, ye snails!"

Again and again the great guns belched. The ammunition-cars rumbled out with their loads, the handling-room crew strained at their task until their bodies were streaming with sweat. Then, abruptly, the clang and clamor ceased with almost painful sharpness. The petty officer nodded again.

"Up with you!" he said, with a grin.

By the time Joe reached the deck the *Alaska* was swarming with white figures, and officers were everywhere, their glasses glued to the distant target. Behind them the *Washington* had just come on the range, and her guns were flashing.

On top of the turret, Pat Kelly was waving his hat and shouting, "Six hits out of seven shots!"

The *Alaska* wheeled in a huge circle, and a few moments later the men were hurrying back to their posts in preparation for the second round. All day the hammering went on, and when, late in the afternoon, the last shot was fired, all hands drew a long breath of relief. Not until night, when the riddled target-screens were brought in and the jagged holes counted, would the actual results be known; but every one knew that the score would be high, and that the ship which beat the *Alaska's* total would have to "go some."

Ordinarily a hard day's work means a complete knocking off of all work at night, but there was to be no rest for the crew of the *Alaska*.

CLEARING THE SEAS

From the flag-ship came orders that night-firing with the guns of the intermediate and secondary batteries was to be held.

In this work Joe had no actual part, as the big guns of the main battery were not to be used, so he found a commanding perch on the boat-deck.

Hardly had he found a place when two other members of the turret force, Brown and Haddock, joined him. Haddock had just come from the inspection of the screens, and was shaking his head dolefully.

"No use trying to shoot against those chaps on the *Montana*," he confessed. "Nobody's ever seen such shooting! They beat our total by four hits!"

Joe felt a sharp twinge of disappointment. Of course, the defeat was not his fault, yet he could not help taking it as a personal matter.

"We'll get 'em next year!" he said aloud in an effort to comfort himself.

On the very heels of his remark every light on the ship was snapped off, and she lay in total darkness. A few seconds later the bright beams of half a dozen search-lights were swinging across the tossing water. The instant they picked up the targets the smaller guns crackled into action.

Joe was hardly prepared for the effects. Having passed through the fire of the big guns, he had expected that the reports of the smaller pieces would sound like so many firecrackers. But the effect was exactly the opposite. The

ON THE SEA-RANGE

thundering crashes of the 14-inch guns are so tremendous that they rather deaden the sensitiveness of the hearer, while every snappy crack of the smaller weapons threatens to split his eardrums.

"Some noise!" Haddock shouted into his ear.

But the spectacle was enough to make Joe forget his physical discomfort. Out of the darkness on all sides of him, bright red in contrast to the white beams from the search-lights, leaped the flashes of the small guns, some from the broad-side batteries on the gun-deck, others from different points of the superstructure. The water was literally cut to foam by a perfect hail of projectiles, and the distant targets were shot so full of holes in a few seconds that the firing had to cease until other targets could be towed into position.

"No torpedo-boat could get through fire like that," Brown said. "We've thrown steel enough in these few minutes to sink a whole fleet of them!"

Fresh targets were placed, and again the secondary guns crackled and flashed. To aid the gunners in correcting the aim, "tracers" were attached to the shells. These tracers were little cups of a secret composition containing magnesium which flared up as the shell left the muzzle of the gun, and continued to burn during the flight of the shell, so that the air seemed full of hundreds of rockets.

CLEARING THE SEAS

As he watched the firing Joe tried to imagine what it would be like if such a fire were coming toward the *Alaska* instead of whirling out of the black muzzles of her own guns. That any ship, great or small, could endure such a hail of metal seemed past belief.

"Suppose—" he began, when, suddenly, ringing clear above the noise of the guns, rose the sharp, insistent blast of the ship's bugles sounding "cease firing." Instantly the guns were silent, and in the sudden stillness curious voices could be heard on every side asking what had happened.

IV

THE ALARM

AS Joe got to his feet and started to climb down from the boat-deck to the forecastle, he heard a voice say: "Something's gone wrong somewhere. The flag-ship's been working her ardois signals for the last five minutes, and I saw the *Arkansas's* guns go black two minutes ago."

Again the bugles sounded, this time calling "general quarters." Joe had answered the same call hundreds of times, but somehow never with quite the same feeling. There seemed to be a new note in the tone of the bugles, a new feeling about the quick, sharp tune of the call. He went to his post with a feeling that something out of the ordinary was in the air. Surely gun practice would not be interrupted and "general quarters" sounded at nine o'clock at night for nothing!

The men in the handling-room beneath No. 2 turret were sober and silent; but it was a different sort of silence than had reigned in the same place a few hours earlier, when they had been waiting for the first crashing discharge of the big

CLEARING THE SEAS

guns. Then Joe and his companions had been keyed up to a high pitch of nervous excitement, waiting for the instant that would let them work off their feelings at the work for which they had spent weeks and months of preparation.

Now they were silent under that strange feeling that the coming of unknown things brings with it. It was like the sudden stillness which accompanies the darkness and gathering clouds of a thunder-storm in the very midst of a bright June day.

Unconsciously the men turned their eyes toward Stimson, the tall, weather-beaten gunner's mate who had charge of the handling-room. He shook his head in answer to the unasked question.

"Don't ask me," he said. "Yes, it's something big, all right. I've been in the navy ten years, and I never knew night-firing stopped before."

The men fell into uneasy, low-voiced conversation. All of them would have felt easier had it been daylight, or even had they been up on deck, where they could see what was going on. Down in the steel pit they were as thoroughly cut off from the deck as though they were a thousand miles away. They could hear nothing, see nothing.

"There's a lot of things it might be," muttered the man next Joe. "Might have been an accident on one of the other ships—although we'd probably have heard about that."

"Maybe the President or some big gun is dead," suggested another.

THE ALARM

The first speaker shook his head. "They'd have half-masted the flag," he objected, "and we'd have been told."

"I don't believe the officers know what's happened any more than we do," Joe said.

Two or three faces were turned toward him.

"What makes you think that?" demanded some one.

"I don't know," he confessed; "it's just a sort of feeling."

And although they laughed at him, Joe could not shake off the impression that something strange and sinister had come into the very midst of the fleet while the guns were banging, and that perhaps no one outside the Admiral knew just what it was.

A few minutes later the bugles sounded "retreat from quarters." Hammocks were piped down, and the men turned in, yet the usual order of things was not being observed. The deck-watches had been doubled, the Captain, according to whispered report, had not left the bridge, and had been joined by the Executive Officer, the Ordnance Officer, and the First Lieutenant. Only the riding-lights were lighted, but the search-lights were all manned, the signal-boys were on the superstructure within easy call of the bridge, and some of the crews of the semi-automatic and quick-firing guns had been sent back to their stations.

Ted Brandt reached out a long arm and shook

CLEARING THE SEAS

Joe's swinging bed. "What d'ye make of all this?" he asked in a whisper, as soon as Joe's head popped into sight.

"It's got me," confessed Joe.

"Some big news or other has come to the fleet," Ted said. "A boat came in from the southwest right in the midst of the firing. I saw the flag-ship flashing her to sheer off, but she talked back with her ardois lights and kept right on coming. Little fellow, it was, but walking right along. Better than twenty knots if I'm any judge."

"Where is she now?"

"She hove to the other side of the flag-ship," Brandt went on. "Can't see her at all. I think there was a launch going back and forth, but I couldn't make out with all those 'tracers' flying."

There was an instant's silence; then Joe said: "But if it was just a message—even an unusually important one, why wouldn't they use the wireless? We're within easy reach of the Arlington aeri-als."

Ted raised his long body upright and leaned closer. "That's what puzzled me," he admitted; "but I've got it figured out. They didn't trust the wireless!"

"Didn't trust it?" repeated Joe. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. They were afraid of a leak. If they'd flashed it from any of those big senders, anybody might have picked it up."

"Of course," answered Joe, "but—"

THE ALARM

"Oh, I know," Brandt broke in. "No other fleet's come stealing in on us, but the wireless man on some big liner might get it."

"It would be in code," objected Joe. "He couldn't read it."

Ted grunted. "I'd hate to have any wireless message I didn't want read get into the hands of one of those liner operators—code or no code," he said. "They're a pretty smart lot; they have a lot of time on their hands, and there isn't much about wireless sending and receiving they don't know. They pick up a lot of code stuff out of the air, and I'll bet they know a good bit of what they're not supposed to."

"What do you suppose the message is?" Joe wondered.

To his astonishment, Ted was ready with a definite answer. "I think they've found out there's a foreign spy in the fleet!" he announced.

Joe did not stop to realize how thoroughly inconsistent with the rest of Ted's argument such a conclusion was. It fitted in perfectly with the strange feeling of uneasiness he had experienced ever since the sudden stopping of the firing.

A few minutes later he fell asleep. In his dreams he was going about the ship, and everywhere, from double bottom to maintop, strange, foreign faces with dark skins and fierce beards kept peeping out at him, then disappearing before he could get them.

V

WAR!

REVEILLE the next morning was hardly needed. Not a man on board the *Alaska* but was out of his hammock at the first note of the stirring summons. And not a few of them had slipped across the dark deck during the night, and peeked through open ports at the twinkling lights of the distant flag-ship.

But those who had expected the morning to bring a quick solution of the strange proceedings of the night before were disappointed. Target practice was not resumed, a few of the ships had shifted their positions slightly, and the lookouts were kept doubled; otherwise the ordinary day's routine went on as usual, sweepers were piped, officers' and sick calls were sounded, and the day began as uneventfully as possible.

Yet there was one thing which proved that something out of the ordinary had happened, and after one glance toward the flag-ship Joe knew that the queer events of the night and his talk with Brandt afterward had not been the dreams he had commenced to think them.

WAR!

For anchored within a few cable-lengths of the *Texas* was a low, rakish, slim-hulled torpedo-destroyer, a faint haze of smoke showing from its four squat funnels, the moving figures of men busy about its decks.

The morning passed without any occurrence out of the ordinary. One thing only impressed Joe. Although there was no immediate prospect of resuming practice with the guns, the ship was left cleared for action.

A short time before noon the torpedo-boat and two of the scout-ships attached to the fleet weighed anchor, but instead of turning their prows to the west they headed out to sea, thrusting their sharp prows into the teeth of a gathering northeaster.

Half an hour later the signal to weigh anchor was flashed by the fluttering flags from the *Texas* to the entire fleet, and within a few minutes the ponderous "mud-hooks" had been dragged clear of their holdings and hoisted aboard, and the different ships had reported themselves ready.

Again the long column, strung out at carefully estimated intervals, headed toward the west, the *Texas* at the head of the column, the veteran *Minnesota*, two miles and a half astern, bringing up the rear.

Hardly was the fleet under way when the boatswain's whistles piped to quarters. Joe answered the summons with a beating heart. Instead of remaining at their regular posts, the entire crew, with the exception of the lookouts,

CLEARING THE SEAS

watches, and engineer's force, were mustered on the gun-deck—the fore-castle, the usual place for such gatherings, being too wild a spot now with a fair sea running and the protective railings removed.

Captain Scarlett, a short, square man with a yellow mustache and an unusually white skin which no amount of wind and weather could tan, came on to the deck, his officers in full dress grouping in a little knot behind him.

"Men," Captain Scarlett began, abruptly, "I have to tell you that a state of war now exists between the United States and the Blues. In all history no declaration of war has been made so abruptly, nor have two great nations been plunged so suddenly into hostilities.

"It is a war waged by a military power upon a people who have professed and sought for world-wide peace. Our foe, counting upon our unprepared state, has struck quickly.

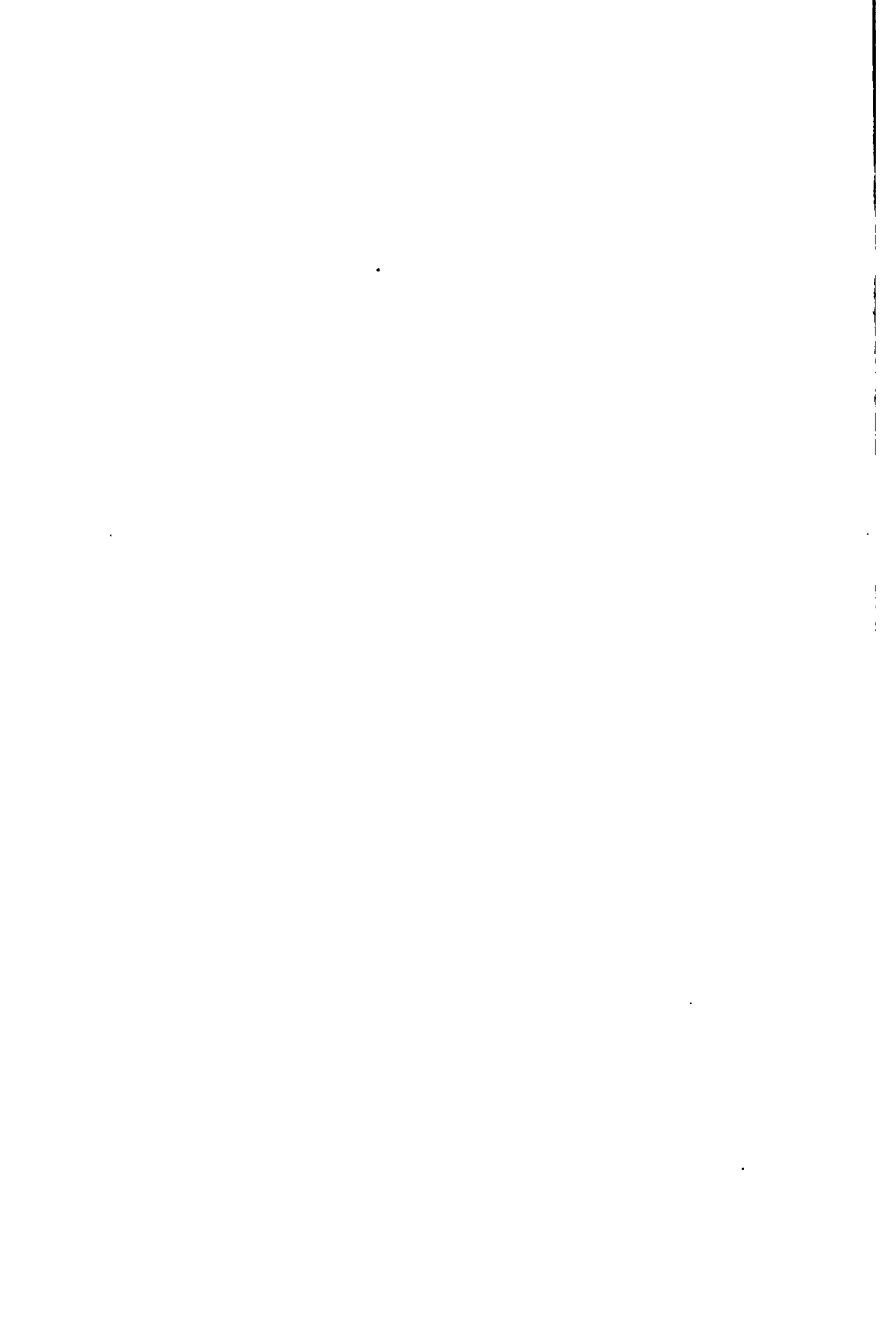
"No foe from overseas can invade the United States without first reckoning with the American navy. Upon our ships and their crews rests the safety of the republic."

He turned abruptly and walked away, accompanied by the Executive Officer.

Like the crew of every other war-ship in the world, the men of the *Alaska* had been wont to complain of the uneventful times of peace, and to long for a chance for actual service. Yet, instead of receiving the Captain's announcement with the



**"MEN, I HAVE TO TELL YOU THAT A STATE OF WAR NOW EXISTS BETWEEN
THE UNITED STATES AND THE BLUES"**



WAR !

wild cheers which might have been expected, they listened to the announcement of the declaration of war in absolute silence.

There had been wars and rumors of wars during the lifetime of every man present, but they had come gradually, after much wrangling of diplomats and exchanges of notes and ultimatums. This thing had come without a word of warning, unexpected as a sharp order from the Admiral. The men were fairly stunned.

And war against the Blues, of all people! Had it been a fight with a combination of South American states, or even the much-discussed struggle with Japan, it would not have been such a surprise—but the Blues!

Joe found himself one of a circle of younger men surrounding Pat Kelly, who was talking hard and fast.

"They've a bigger navy than ours, lads," he was saying—"more men, more ships. They've spent more millions on it, ground out of an unwilling people. They're fighters. It's a business with them. But they'll show no target-screens like those we made yesterday, and it's straight shooting counts.

"And the straight shooting's all we have to think about. Remember that. From the Captain down, we've the finest lot of officers in the world—bar none. They'll see to it that we're in the right place at the right time. We've only our part of it to think about."

CLEARING THE SEAS

When the wheel and lookout were relieved at six o'clock, Joe (who had a reputation for sharp eyes) went back to duty in the top, with Ted Brandt as his companion.

As they settled themselves for the long vigil, drawing up the collars of their reefers against the sharp cut of the wind, Joe asked:

"When do you suppose things will begin to happen?"

"It wouldn't surprise me if we saw something to-night," answered Brandt. "You heard what the Captain said. They've struck quick, hoping to catch us unprepared. You mark my word, there are Blue war-ships pretty close to us right now. They planned to strike before the fleet could get off the range."

As though to support his words, the signal, "All you can make," was flashed from the flagship, and the great ships began to quiver to the powerful thrust of the great engines running at full speed.

It was hard for Joe to make himself believe that he was awake and that a state of war with a powerful foe actually existed, but, for all that, he scanned the black expanse of rolling water with an intentness that fairly made his eyes ache.

VI

AT WASHINGTON

TO gain some idea of the manner in which the news which had sent the torpedo-boat rushing through the Atlantic to the fleet had tumbled out of a clear sky upon the country, it will be necessary to leave the fleet steaming at top speed through the darkness, and look at the city of Washington a few hours before Joe Lawton sat down on the boat-deck of the *Alaska* to watch the night-firing.

On that eventful autumn morning Washington found two items of unusual interest in the papers. The Spanish ambassador had sprained his ankle, and the Navy football team, in its final practice before the annual struggle with the cadets from West Point, had displayed such fine form that the coaches predicted a victory over the Army team by a large score.

Congress had spent the previous day in routine affairs, the President had done nothing more exciting than to take his daily horseback ride.

In an inconspicuous corner of the paper appeared a small paragraph which stated that the

CLEARING THE SEAS

Blue ambassador was confined to his house by a slight cold. Few people read the paragraph, none gave it a second thought, yet it was by far the most important item of the day's news.

Could an outsider have passed the closed door of the Blue Embassy that night, and penetrated to the ambassador's private office, he would have found a little circle of middle-aged and elderly men in serious, low-voiced conversation. Besides the ambassador there were present the head of a great transatlantic steamship line and three men of military appearance, who had come to America under assumed names during the past few weeks, and whose passage home was already booked for the next day. This secret conference did not break up until three o'clock in the morning, and when it did war was a certainty and the subsequent efforts of the government to avert trouble were useless.

About ten o'clock the next morning there was delivered at the White House by a messenger from the Blue Embassy the most amazing document Washington had ever seen. By noon all the city and a great part of the country knew that the Blue government had demanded a lowering of toll-rates on all its ships passing through the Panama Canal, the opening of the Canal to its war-ships, the placing of the Canal forts in the hands of a force composed of the troops of six different nations, the withdrawal of the United States from several islands of the Philippine group,

AT WASHINGTON

and the formal abandonment by this country of the Monroe Doctrine.

Of course the demands were preposterous, and no one dreamed for an instant that they would be granted, or that the Blue government would make a serious attempt to enforce them.

Congress at once abandoned all regular business, messengers flew back and forth between the Blue Embassy and the White House, and the former building was fairly besieged by newspaper men and the representatives of other powers—all of whom were denied admittance.

The newspapers poured out extra editions as fast as they could be run from the presses, the streets filled with excited crowds. Even so early in the day reports from New York told of the sudden excitement in the stock-market, amounting almost to a panic.

By the middle of the afternoon (up to which time every one had insisted that the whole business was a huge misunderstanding, or that the Blue ambassador had lost his mind) people began to realize that it was nothing less than a deliberate attempt of the Blues to force this country into a war.

The moment for such a move was well timed. France and England were involved in a serious dispute arising from the sinking of some fishing-vessels in the English Channel, Russia was massing troops in the Far East in fear of another war with Japan. The Blues were free to

CLEARING THE SEAS

move without fear of interference from other powers.

All day long Washington hummed and buzzed, and the huge crowds never left the streets. Pennsylvania Avenue was packed from the Treasury to the Capitol, and the streets around the Blue Embassy, the White House, and the War Department were fairly blocked for ordinary traffic.

Cable after cable was flashed across the Atlantic in an effort to bring the Blue government to a reasonable state of mind, but all to no purpose. They had laid their plans; they would not withdraw their impossible demands.

Never had the machinery of government moved so rapidly. Within a few hours of the first alarm the President and his advisers realized that the war could not be avoided, and that the Blues were counting upon the suddenness of the attack to fairly demoralize the American forces. Unjust as the war might be, and unwilling as the government was to drag the country into a great war, it was a moment when there was but a single course open and when to waste time was to give the Blues the very chance they wanted.

Congress, without pausing for the usual dinner-hour at night, passed a joint resolution rejecting the Blue demands, and empowering the President to take all measures necessary for the immediate defense of the country.

At midnight Senate and House gathered in the Senate Chamber. The galleries were packed, and

AT WASHINGTON

double guards were at all the doors. Against all precedents, the President addressed the united Houses. His usually florid face was pale and drawn from the strain, and his voice was tired, though firm.

"We are embarking," he said, "upon a necessary, almost a holy war. It is none of our choosing; it has been forced upon us without warning and with the intention of wrecking our present high state of prosperity.

"The day has long passed when wars can be waged for any purpose, least of all for such purely selfish purposes as have driven our foe to this measure. We are a peaceful people about to receive the attack of one which has made war a profession. I believe that we shall win and that our victory will be a great step toward a lasting and a universal peace.

"We shall be called upon to make great sacrifices, but I feel sure that they will be made in the greatest cause for which we have ever fought."

That night the swiftest torpedo-destroyer within call was churning its way toward the Atlantic Fleet, the vessels of the Pacific Fleet were ordered to make all speed toward the threatened eastern seaboard, the forces of the regular army were mobilized, and a call was issued for volunteers.

From all parts of the country messages of confidence and support of the government's policy poured into Washington. Public demonstrations occurred all over the United States. Every one

CLEARING THE SEAS

realized that the war was bound to be terrible, that it might be long, and that it would cause great suffering and greater damage to business, yet the entire country stood back of the government and turned a united front toward the foe.

VII

THE GREAT STORM

THE fleet of American war-ships which was making for the coast with all the speed of which the great engines were capable, was one of the most powerful squadrons that had ever been gathered under one flag. The actual number of vessels was not great, but the total number of guns of heavy caliber, and the weight of metal which the fleet could hurl from a single discharge of its main batteries, made the collection of steel fighting-machines an almost irresistible force.

Although the Admiral's flag was flown from the *Texas*, there were newer and more powerful ships in the fleet. At the head of the list came the *Alaska* and *Porto Rico*, huge dreadnoughts 550 feet long, carrying main batteries of twelve 14-inch guns, mounted fore and aft in revolving turrets, and broadside batteries of sixteen 7-inch guns. The huge vessels weighed nearly 30,000 tons apiece, yet in spite of their great size they were capable of traveling at a speed of twenty-two knots (about twenty-six miles) an hour.

The flag-ship carried ten 14-inch guns, and after

CLEARING THE SEAS

her came the sister-ships *Delaware* and *North Dakota*, each with a main battery of ten 12-inch guns.

Next in point of power came the *Louisiana*, *Minnesota*, and *Kansas*, and finally, oldest of all, the *Rhode Island* and *Georgia*, battle-ships put into commission in 1906.

In addition to the ten battle-ships there were four armored cruisers, the *Pennsylvania*, *Tennessee*, *Maryland*, and *California*, almost as large as the largest of the battle-ships, but not so heavily armed or armored. They were built more for speed than for fighting power—yet were a match for many of the ships of the Blue navy.

The feeling of confidence which stole into Joe Lawton's mind, as he thrashed his arms to keep warm in his lofty perch in the foretop, was shared by every officer and man in the great fleet. They knew that they were more than a match for a superior number of Blue ships—which for the most part were not as powerful as the American craft.

And had the American fleet been able to put forth its full strength against the first blow of the Blue invasion, the war might have taken a different course from the outset, and history of a different sort might have been made.

But forces beyond the control of either the Blue invaders or the American defenders were gathering even while Joe and Ted scanned the water for the first sign of a hostile ship.

Just as in a game of football a lucky fumble

THE GREAT STORM

may turn defeat into victory, or, on the diamond, an easy grounder may strike a pebble, bounce over the shortstop's head and go for a hit with the bases full and two men out—so the element of luck thrust itself between the two fleets which were approaching each other, and decided the issue for them.

Joe and his companion had not been in the look-out more than an hour when it became apparent that what had started to be no more than a stiff blow was rapidly taking on the character of a gale. The wind increased in violence, and sharp spits of snow whipped through the air and into Joe's face.

At intervals a big wave swept across the fore-castle, and the spray of its breaking crest slapped the muzzles of the guns sticking out of the forward turret. Big and powerful as she was, the *Alaska* pitched and rolled under the thrust of the big seas, and Joe and his companion were forced to hang on tightly as their lofty perch swayed back and forth in a huge arc.

"I'm not much of a sailor," Joe said, raising his voice to a perfect bellow to make the words carry against the rush and roar of the wind; "but this looks to me like a good deal of a storm."

Ted nodded as he cleared his eyes of snow with the back of his mittened hand. "It's a buster?" he shouted back.

From moment to moment the storm increased in violence, and some sort of protective measures

CLEARING THE SEAS

had to be taken. Like the huge ocean liners, a modern battle-ship can steam straight on her course without paying much attention to the ordinary storm—but it was fast becoming clear that this was no ordinary storm.

From their position aloft Joe and Ted caught shadowy glimpses of the work that was going on below them, and their experience with previous storms and frequent drills told them the rest.

All the guns, large and small, were "housed"—that is, run back into the deck or turret as far as possible—and doubly secured against the possibility of breaking loose from their mounts. A network of life-lines was stretched about the decks, where it was already difficult for a man to keep his footing.

A great sea-anchor composed of spars and timbers was built and cast astern, while bags of oil were trailed alongside to flatten out the breaking waves.

From the change in the pulsations of the engines Joe could tell that the ship had reduced speed in spite of the great need for haste, and he knew that down in the fiery quarters of the hold there would be little rest for engineers and firemen through the long night. For in time of storm the engines of a steamship become her most vital part. For the time being the guns and ammunition of the *Alaska* were of secondary importance.

Every great wave that lifted the stern of the

THE GREAT STORM

vessel set the two huge screws to racing wildly, and racing screws are apt to play havoc with engines unless they are carefully watched. The Chief Engineer never left his post, and his men watched every move of the great spinning masses of shining metal on whose motions the safety of the ship and crew had come to depend.

From time to time Ted or Joe would turn to the speaking-tube and call down to the bridge:

"All's well aloft!"

They were forced to scream into the mouth-piece against the howling of the gale, and they could faintly hear the responding voice of the officer at the other end of the tube.

As the storm increased in violence it began to seem to Joe that nothing short of the sudden falling of the waves could possibly keep the ship from being torn to pieces.

"How much of this can she stand?" he shouted in his companion's ear.

"All they can blow!" Ted called back; "but it's going to be one awful trick to hold the fleet together. Look how the lights are scattered already!"

It was true. Each ship was compelled to attend to itself, and, in spite of the efforts of the navigating officers and their men, the regular formation had been lost. Some of the lights were dancing and bobbing to port, others were scattered about the roaring waters to starboard.

"And I'll bet we're not logging two knots an

CLEARING THE SEAS

hour," Joe said to himself, for the *Alaska* was plowing head on into the great seas, and it was impossible that even her enormous motive power could drive her forward against such gigantic waves.

All this time Joe had not felt terrified. The danger was too enormous to make such a small matter as his own personal safety seem worth considering. His mind had been so occupied with other things that he had not had time to be frightened.

Even when the swinging mast threatened to sweep down until its occupants were plunged into the crest of a wave, or a huge comber broke over the ship and buried everything but stacks and superstructure from sight, Joe's heart did not leap into his throat, as it had sometimes in the past over dangers that were trifling in comparison with his present predicament.

Both Joe and Ted had unconsciously abandoned their efforts to keep a lookout, other than to watch the lights of the other ships of the fleet. No war-ship of any navy would be so rash as to attempt an action under such conditions, and no danger was to be feared from the Blues—even should their fleet be within striking distance at the time, a possibility which Joe could not bring himself to believe.

The pair had their hands full keeping their position, bracing themselves against the awful rushes of the mast through the air, and hammer-

THE GREAT STORM

ing each other into something like warmth at those times when the ship slid down into a trough between the waves and did not pitch so badly for a few seconds.

Once, as he was hammering Joe's back and shoulders, Ted shouted: "How queer the smoke smells! Noticed it?"

"Yes," answered Joe, "just in the last half-hour."

Then the biggest wave yet fell on the ship, buried the decks, and roared crashing against the superstructure, smashing a couple of boats and tearing at the bridge and conning-tower with a terrible fury. Through the flying snow and spray Joe caught a glimpse of oilskin-clad figures on the bridge.

A minute later Joe exclaimed: "That smell is stronger. I don't believe it comes from the stacks at all."

At the same time he became conscious of a small, penetrating noise that sounded through the howling of the storm, but seemed no part of it. For a minute he could not place it, then in a flash he knew. Somebody was calling frantically through the speaking-tube there within a few inches of his ear.

"Ay, ay, sir!" he called.

"What's the matter aloft?" came the faint voice.

"All's well, sir. Couldn't hear you calling."

"Report aft on the berth-deck at once!"

CLEARING THE SEAS

The descent to the deck was a thing which would have fairly paralyzed a landsman. Even inside the partial protection of the weblike mast it was a fight every inch of the way. Ted and Joe made it in safety because they were young and strong, used to the trick of hanging with fingers and toes to insecure and slippery footing, and as near without fear as men can be in the presence of real danger.

Bad as it had been aloft, they found conditions in the covered decks almost worse. It was almost impossible to keep one's feet; most of the decks had been flooded in spite of hastily closed ports, and everything movable had been smashed by the lurching of the vessel.

They had little time for looking about, or little wish for it, for the instant they reached the deck their nostrils were assailed by the smell they had faintly caught above, and Joe's heart gave its first flutter of terror.

He did not need the whispered words of the man next him to tell him what had happened.

"Fire in one of the port bunkers," the man said. "They say it's close to a 3-inch magazine!"

Fire in the hold of a merchant-ship is bad enough; fire in the coal of a war-ship is a thing which makes men turn pale. There was enough powder on board the *Alaska* to blow the great ship to shreds! To fight the fire in calm weather would have been a comparatively simple matter; to cope with it while the ship was floundering like

THE GREAT STORM

a wild thing under their feet was a different thing.

Led by a midshipman and a boatswain, the first relief party hurried down into the fire-rooms, Joe among them. Below-decks the smell was much stronger and the air was full of a faint haze of smoke.

The ordinary methods of fire-fighting could not be followed in such a storm. In relays the men plunged into the smoldering bunker, shoveled the burning coal into iron buckets, and staggered out.

In half an hour Joe was covered with coal-dust from head to foot, tired in every muscle, his whole system filled with smoke and fumes. But neither he nor any other man thought of shirking. The storm and everything else were forgotten; they were intent simply on putting out the fire.

The 3-inch magazine, whose steel wall had commenced to grow hot, was flooded with water, the shifts of sweating figures working in the bunker were doubled in number. Cooks' helpers with buckets of steaming coffee and great baskets of bread fed the men as they dropped down to rest.

Hour after hour passed. Joe and his companions lost all track of time. A boatswain's mate had to grab Joe by the shoulder and tell him that his division of the port watch was relieved for three hours, and that he could sleep.

As he staggered drowsily off toward the berth-deck, he was conscious that somebody was telling him about the fire.

CLEARING THE SEAS

"Wet coal," the voice said. "Spontaneous combustion caused by the stuff's shifting in the storm. If some of the other bunkers don't flare up we're all right."

Joe cared for nothing except the chance to lie down and sleep. He dropped in the first soft place he found, and nobody had time to forbid him. As he dropped off he felt surprised to find that the storm was as furious as ever and that it was still dark outside. It seemed to him that he had been in the bunkers for years.

The next thing he knew somebody was hammering him into consciousness and a voice was shouting:

"Second division port watch report in Fire-room Number Two!"

Another fire! All that day and all that night the struggle went on. The men, covered with black dust, hollow-eyed, and drawn from lack of sleep, fought the fires while the great ship fought the hurricane. They dropped down and slept where they could. Mess-calls were unknown; the cooks and their helpers never left the galleys, and the men ate and drank where they worked.

The fires did not spread. They could not eat their way out of the bunkers, for there was nothing but steel walls for them to feed upon.

But the coal had to be saved! Even should the *Alaska* weather the storm, she would be a helpless hulk should she find herself at sea without fuel.

THE GREAT STORM

All track of the rest of the fleet had been lost. The wireless system had long since ceased to respond. Once or twice ships of the fleet had been sighted, but all attempts to exchange signals had failed.

Just where the *Alaska* was even the Navigating Officer did not know. She had been blown out of her course and had been making anywhere from two to ten knots an hour off and on ever since the storm began.

VIII

THE SMOKE-PLUMES

SOMEWHERE around six o'clock on the morning of the fourth day Joe opened his eyes and stretched his aching limbs in response to the insistent summons of the bugle. He had been lying on his hammock, stretched on the cold linoleum of the berth-deck, for to attempt to swing it was out of the question.

As he stared upward he could hardly believe his eyes, for the ship was only rolling in long, smooth slides. The storm had broken!

The decks of the *Alaska* were a sight. As she had entered the hurricane cleared for action, railings, stanchions, ventilators, etc., had not suffered as would otherwise have been the case. But the bridge was bent and twisted, the chart-house badly damaged, the paint marred and scratched everywhere, stacks and superstructure, even the masts, coated with rust and a crust of salt.

Nor were the crew in any better plight. If Captain Scarlett had slept during the storm, he had done so standing up, and no one but the man who stood next him on the bridge knew it. The

THE SMOKE-PLUMES

same held true for the other officers. The men had slept when they could, they had done terrific work on scant rations for three days, and had not had their clothes off in that time.

Yet not a life had been lost, and save for the damage to the coal, to the upper decks, and to the flooded magazine, the *Alaska* had come through the terrible ordeal unharmed.

But Joe and the rest of the crew had to mutter their prayers of thanksgiving as they went back to their endless tasks, for as Joe opened his eyes the boatswains were piping:

"A-1-1 hands turn to and right ship!"

It fell to Joe's lot to invade the tangled wreckage of the boat-deck and start clearing away the work of the storm. The men had not been busy at their various tasks half an hour when from the lookout came a sharp hail:

"Smoke ho!"

And then, in answer to the question from the bridge:

"Off the port bow, sir, and traveling fast!"

The work went on, but every man worked with one eye on the tiny black patch on the gray skyline. Fifteen minutes later the lookout reported another plume of smoke, then another, then three close together, all steaming west.

From man to man among the working-parties went the words, "We're picking up the fleet!"

The wireless operator, assisted by the ship's electricians, was trying to get his apparatus into

CLEARING THE SEAS

working order, and the signal-boys had already been summoned to the bridge—dotted with the blue figures of officers, each with his glasses trained on the distant ships.

The minutes seemed to drag. The work of clearing up the débris went steadily forward, the guns were removed from their housings and run out of the ports. One by one the petty officers in charge of the different divisions came to the bridge and reported everything put to rights.

And steadily the little clouds of smoke on the horizon grew larger and blacker.

"We ought to pick up the *Porto Rico* and the flag-ship first," Ted said, as he and Joe knotted the muscles of their backs over a whale-boat that had been torn from its lashings. "They'll have made better weather of it than the rest."

As he straightened up Joe happened to glance toward the bridge. He saw Captain Scarlett's squat figure suddenly stiffen, stand for an instant motionless. Then one arm went up and came down on his thigh with a gesture that was hard to read. All the figures on the bridge suddenly ran to one side and stood leaning forward. Then an ensign whirled and shouted something down the speaking-tube.

"Ted!" Joe called, sharply, and at the same moment the bugles commenced "general quarters" for the second time in that eventful week.

Joe felt his cheeks and the muscles around his

THE SMOKE-PLUMES

mouth go suddenly stiff. "Blue ships!" he said. "They're Blue ships!"

Ted Brandt was shaking a bony fist toward the distant vessels.

"Luck!" he shouted. "Plain luck! Either they missed the storm or had time to run in somewhere out of it. Six to one, is it? All right, come ahead!"

As they hurried toward the handling-room that phrase kept running through Joe's brain. "Six to one! Six to one!"

A moment later the *Alaska*, silent, battered, but grim, had turned her blunt nose toward the six plumes of smoke that came from the funnels of Blue ships!

IX

THE FIRST BLOWS

FOR a few moments after the Blue ships were sighted the *Alaska* looked very much like an ant-hill after the inmates have been disturbed. Men were flying in every direction, and it seemed as though the crew had been struck by a sudden panic.

But no drill of disciplined soldiers moving across a parade-ground in straight-ruled lines had less of real confusion about it than this same scurrying of figures about the great ship. Every man had a definite duty to perform, and a particular post which he was trying to reach in the shortest possible time.

Joe's place was in the handling-room under forward fourteen-inch turret No. 2, and he hurried for it by the shortest possible route the instant the clamor of the bugles started the men into activity. There was no chance for a word with Ted or any one else. Every man on board was too intent on the business of getting to his place to have time for speech.

A queer tremor seemed to have affected Joe's

THE FIRST BLOWS

legs as his feet reached for the rungs of the steel ladders leading to the lower decks. He was not frightened; there had been no time for that—yet he knew that under ordinary conditions his legs did not feel as they did at the moment.

As he hurried through the ship he caught glimpses of quick preparations; bulkhead doors being fastened, a few breakables hurried into safety or to the upper decks to be thrown overboard. The great storm had saved time for the *Alaska's* crew; the ship was cleared for action the instant the enemy was sighted.

It was a matter of seconds before the handling-room crew was assembled. It seemed only a few moments before that they had hurried to their places, spurred on by the pleasant excitement of the target-shooting. The interval of the storm seemed to belong to another existence. It was hard for Joe to realize that the ship was on the verge of actual battle, that within a few hours the planks of the familiar decks would be splintered by shells. Had it not been for the sharp picture of those six silent, grim ships that he had just seen, it would have been easy to believe the whole thing a dream.

The men of the crew stood rather limply, looking at each other and waiting. There was none of the sharp nervousness of the target work. Nobody spoke. One or two men glanced at the closed jaws of steel that shut the handling-room off from the turret itself.

CLEARING THE SEAS

There were none of the heroics popularly supposed to occur on the eve of battle. The officer in charge made no speech to the men, but stood looking at a tiny cut on the side of his little finger that had started bleeding.

From the attitudes of the men it might have been thought that they were tired or indifferent. There was no tenseness about them; they rather lolled at their posts.

With the first clang of steel as the plates above their heads swung open, however, everything changed. As though every one of them had been attached to the same wire, the men sprang to their work, the two shells and the bags of smokeless powder were placed on the hoists, and the hoists clanked up to the gun.

Again there came a pause, and waiting now was no easy matter.

"What's keeping us back?" demanded the man next Joe.

"Manœuvering for position," Joe answered. "With six against one, we've got to try to make our kind of a fight against them."

The pause was not a long one. Within a few seconds the two guns of No. 2 turret roared, and from other parts of the ship came a succession of muffled roars and jars that made themselves felt through the steel walls.

"All guns," grunted a second-enlistment man, as he tugged at a powder-bag. "We must have sailed right into the middle of 'em."

THE FIRST BLOWS

Although Joe had known that the handling-room was far down in the depths of the vessel, protected from the enemy's fire by the armored deck, the main armor belt, and the massive steel barbette of the turret itself, he had not realized how completely it would be cut off from the rest of the ship in time of action.

It was exactly like working in the steel vault of a bank when something exciting was going on in the street outside. He and his companions knew no more of the progress of the fight—or even the nature of it—than people on shore hundreds of miles away. They did not know what had happened to the men in the magazines or in the turret, and could only infer that no damage had been done in these quarters by the enemy's fire, since the ammunition continued to reach them, and the steel plates overhead continued to open in their mute appeals for more of it!

"I don't like this fighting in the dark!" Joe confessed to the second-enlistment man as he paused to wipe the perspiration streaming down his face.

"Don't you worry," answered the veteran. "It won't be long before they'll shoot holes enough in our sides for us to see through all we want!"

The tremendous racket above had now settled into a steady thunder of sound, as though giants were beating on the deck of the vessel with great hammers. It was impossible for Joe to guess how much of the noise was caused by the fire of the

CLEARING THE SEAS

Alaska's guns, and how much by the impact and explosion of the Blue shells. The ship must have been struck many times already, for Joe was sure that they had been in action for hours.

It had not occurred to him that any one could distinguish the details of the firing, and he was astonished when the man next him said:

"Something gone wrong with Number One turret. They're only doing half what they ought to."

"Suppose it's hit?" Joe asked as the pair of them fell like beavers on a heap of powder-bags.

"More likely the plug-man's at fault," answered the other. "You've got to pet the breech mechanism of the left-hand gun up there or she balks on you. And Bill Stephens ain't above losing his head and messing things up."

Even as the man spoke there came from the turret over their heads a ripping explosion quite different from the reports of the guns. Instinctively every man of the handling-room crew stopped and looked up.

Instead of opening to receive a fresh charge (the two guns had been fired just a few seconds before the strange crash sounded), the steel jaws at the top of the hoists remained tight closed.

"I guess they've let in the daylight you was asking for!" a gruff voice said in Joe's ear.

And from the tone Joe knew that something serious had happened, and that the *Alaska* had received a wound which hurt.

X

THE WOUNDED GIANT

IN those swift minutes which passed while the crew were hurrying to quarters after the sighting of the Blue fleet, and the longer ones which followed, while the men waited at their posts for the firing of the first gun, it was upon the Navigating Officer, the men at the wheel, and the grimy forces of the engine and fire rooms that responsibility rested.

From the Captain down to the youngest midshipman the officers of the *Alaska* knew that they were almost certainly involved in a losing fight. Powerful as their ship was, it could hardly meet six of the Blue craft with a fair show of success.

As the hostile forces approached each other the *Alaska's* officers studied the foe through their glasses. Three of the six vessels proved to be battle-ships, two others were powerful cruisers, while the sixth was one of a new type of vessel built by the Blues, rather lightly armed and armored, but fitted with engines of tremendous power, which gave them a speed far in excess of that of any battle-ship afloat.

CLEARING THE SEAS

No one of the Blue ships was a match for the *Alaska* with her twelve 14-inch and sixteen 7-inch guns; but the combined fire of two of the battle-ships, or one of the battle-ships and the two big cruisers, would more than equal that of the American ship in weight of metal.

So it became necessary for the *Alaska*, if she was to fight with any hope of success, to manoeuvre in such fashion that she might engage the Blue ships singly, or, that failing, cripple the heavier ships early in the action, then turn her attention to the weaker ones.

But the Blues knew their advantage and prepared to hold it. The swift, light-armed cruiser showed a huge cloud of smoke above her four slim funnels, and darted off to a position where she was fairly out of danger. The three battle-ships then formed in a line, with the less powerful cruisers some distance in the rear of the middle battle-ship. To strike at the two cruisers the *Alaska* must break through the line.

At once the *Alaska* met this manoeuvre by altering her course and steaming to the right, seeking to engage the left-hand Blue battle-ship before the other two could come to her aid. The Blues, however, had taken precautions against such a move. The intervals separating the three battle-ships were short enough, so that any two of the ships could move to the support of the third before the *Alaska* could strike.

Minute after minute the six great steel ships

THE WOUNDED GIANT

twisted and turned in an effort to gain some advantage of position. The Blues, convinced that the *Alaska* would never succeed in carrying out her attempt, abandoned their purely defensive tactics and commenced offensive movements.

The two cruisers steamed to right and left, getting rapidly out of effective range, while the battle-ships increased the intervals between them and headed straight for the American ship. The purpose of this move was at once apparent. One of the Blue ships would engage the *Alaska* on each flank—taking up positions so that there was no possibility of their injuring each other by their fire—while the third attacked from directly in front. Thus the *Alaska* would be overmatched at every point.

Throughout all this "feeling out" process Captain Scarlett's squat figure had stood on the bridge motionless as a statue of stone. His glasses had never left the Blue ships, and his orders had been snapped over his shoulder in the curt tones he always employed.

But when the enemy opened out and began to move forward Captain Scarlett stepped back a pace, nodded briefly to his Executive Officer and lowered his glass.

No spoken order was needed. The moment for dodging and side-stepping had passed.

"We must try to stop that, Mr. Sykes," the Captain said, sharply.

The great ship swung round until her broad-

CLEARING THE SEAS

side was toward the approaching vessels, and the six turrets turned smoothly into position. Another nod from the squat figure on the bridge, and the first gun of the battle split the air with its great blast.

Even though the ships were still more than four miles apart, they had been in range for some time. They had held their fire, because it was not so much a question of getting in the first shot as it was one of making the first shot effective. There was no doubt of the ability of either side to inflict injury on the other. The armor-plate which is proof against 12- or 14-inch shells properly placed has not yet been invented. Every one of the six steel monsters was vulnerable.

Flesh and blood was now called upon for its part. Speed and straight shooting were the things that would count now. The crew of the *Alaska* faced a similar problem to the one which had confronted them on the tumbling waters of the range a few days before. Their targets were larger, but they were in motion—and they would shoot back! Joe and his companions had to make their hits, and make them before the hostile shells had done their work.

Before the firing had continued more than a few minutes Captain Scarlett issued fresh orders, and the full force of the *Alaska's* fire was now concentrated on one of the approaching ships.

The effects of this move were at once apparent. Under the rain of steel the Blue ship's masts,

THE WOUNDED GIANT

superstructure, and funnels fairly crumpled. Her masts (solid affairs instead of the wire-cage type used on the American ships) were both shot away, two of her funnels were cut clean off, while the third was riddled, and, even at a distance, it could be seen that her superstructure was being shot to pieces.

But for all the terrible mauling, the Blue ship came on, and her two companions, smoke pouring from their funnels, and great white waves spouting up from their sharp prows, were dashing madly for the points of vantage they had selected, their guns flashing and thundering as they sped.

Grimly the *Alaska* held to her task, preferring to take the fire of two vessels without answering it while she bent all her energies to destroying the third. Every gun that could be brought to bear was being served as rapidly as well-oiled machinery and frantically working humanity could load and fire it.

For twenty terrific minutes the strange fight continued. It seemed like a terrible game of "three-cornered catch." Two of the Blue ships hurled their tons of steel at the *Alaska* as they plowed through the gray water, and the American ship seemed to catch the great shells and send them hurtling back at the third Blue battleship.

Twenty minutes is not a very long time for ordinary things, but it proved too long for the Blue ship, which was trying to reach its ap-

CLEARING THE SEAS

pointed position through the rain of hot steel from no fewer than twenty great guns.

One after another the guns of the Blue ship ceased firing and fell silent, and it seemed that the huge vessel looked more like a floating wreck every yard she foamed through the water. Masts and funnels gone, decks raked by the awful fire, guns twisted out of shape or literally hammered from their carriages, her sides pock-marked by great holes where the shells of the *Alaska* had torn their way through, the Blue ship visibly lost speed, veered off to one side, and, like an injured football-player, began to drag herself out of the fight. As she moved away it could be seen that she was "down by the head," which meant that some of the *Alaska's* shells had pierced her vitals and that she was commencing to take in water.

"We've stopped her!" yelled a signal-boy.

It was true. The *Alaska* had reduced the number of her foes, and won the first trick of the great game.

But the victory had been bought at a price! Both of the *Alaska's* masts had been struck several times, all three of the stacks had been hit, and the bridge itself had been struck four times and almost demolished.

Evidently the gunners in the main batteries of the Blue ships were not as well trained as the Americans in firing at moving objects, for little damage had been done by the shells of heavy caliber, but both the gun-deck and berth-deck

THE WOUNDED GIANT

of the *Alaska* had been badly punished by a perfect hail of the smaller projectiles. Many men in the crews of the guns in the port batteries had been struck, and two small fires had been started by exploding shells.

Moreover, the two Blue battle-ships, both as yet practically uninjured, had now reached positions of great advantage, and the two Blue cruisers were commencing a cautious advance.

Just as the men on the upper decks of the *Alaska* were cheering at the sight of the third Blue ship staggering out of the fight, a big shell struck forward turret No. 1 almost directly between the two guns, and burst with a terrific concussion.

It was the roar of this explosion that Joe had heard down in the steel-walled handling-room.

XI

THE DEFEAT OF THE "ALASKA"

IT seemed to Joe as though the closed steel plates would never open and let them know what had happened in the turret above their heads. For a long minute the men stood looking at each other and waiting.

The officer took a step forward. "Now, men—" he began.

At that instant the tiny telephone on the steel wall buzzed sharply. The officer took down the receiver and answered. Joe could hear the faint squeaking of the voice at the other end of the wire.

"Oakes, Lawton, Talmadge, Smith, Curry—report for duty in the turret!" announced the officer, putting back the receiver of the telephone and turning to the men.

He had no need to tell them what had happened. Some of the gun-crews above had been struck down at their posts, and fresh men were needed to take their places.

As soon as the sliding-doors were opened Joe and the other four men who had been named

DEFEAT OF THE "ALASKA"

scrambled up into the turret. One thought was uppermost in Joe's mind—had Ted Brandt been hit?

He was hardly in the turret before this question was answered by the sight of Ted's white face across the barrel of the huge gun.

Joe did not look about him too closely. He did not want to see the details of what had happened. The faces of the men in the turret told only too plainly what they had seen. Joe did notice that there was a jagged enlargement of one of the ports and a different smell in the air.

There was no time for questions—not even time for Joe to straighten out his thoughts. The *Alaska* was now engaged with the two Blue battle-ships, and every second of time was precious.

With as little loss of time as possible, the turret resumed its work, and Joe fell into place and became a part of the smooth machinery without taking time to more than draw breath.

Joe's duty was to operate one of the rammers—a big plunger operated by electricity which slid along a groove and pushed the shell from the hoist into the yawning breech of the gun.

For a few minutes he did his work instinctively. His muscles obeyed the impulse of his brain, and his fingers closed at the right moment on the lever. But his whole being seemed swallowed up and fairly overwhelmed by the awful clamor of the fight.

The steel walls of the turret protected the men from injury, but they did not shut out a particle

CLEARING THE SEAS

of the din. The crashes of the *Alaska's* guns, the incessant banging of the distant weapons of the Blues, the grind and rip of metal struck by steel projectiles or the sharper sound of splintering wood combined in a frightful din which almost robbed Joe of the power of thought.

Yet in a few seconds he became aware of other sounds, so small in comparison that it seemed impossible that he could hear them at all. His ear caught the notes of a bugle, voices calling on the upper deck, the droning tones of the man who was getting the ranges from the fire-control station and repeating them to the sight-setters, the hissing jets of compressed air which drove the poisonous gases out of the guns after every discharge.

Gradually, as his suddenly assaulted senses grew accustomed to the racket and became more normal, his thoughts took coherent shape. He found that he had been working within three feet of Ted Brandt (for a turret had no room to spare for any one!) almost without realizing it.

As he drove home the rammer and his head came close to Ted's, as the latter swung shut the breech-plug, Joe shouted in his ear:

"What's happened?"

And as soon as Ted got the chance he bellowed back, "Shell hit the edge of the port and some of the splinters came in!"

Joe had not meant that. "I mean outside!" he called.

DEFEAT OF THE "ALASKA"

"Laid one of 'em out!" Ted said.

There followed what was afterward known as the second phase of the *Alaska's* wonderful single-handed fight—a period during which she slugged at the two battle-ships, while the three uninjured Blue cruisers crept closer and closer.

Neither Joe nor Ted gained more than a hazy idea of this part of the fight. Now and then a message of cheer would come to the sweating men of the turret-crew from the bridge or from the fire-control station. But that was all that they knew. They served the gun, sweating like salamanders.

Could they have looked through the walls of the turret they would have seen that the *Alaska* was never still for an instant, but always steaming this way and that, endeavoring to lure the Blue ships into such a position that one of them would blanket the other's fire.

And there were times when this ruse succeeded, for the engines of the American ship were more powerful than those of her antagonists. All three of the contestants showed the terrible scars of battle. Once two turrets on one of the Blue ships were silent for ten minutes, and the anxious watchers in the *Alaska's* tops were about to signal the joyful news to all parts of the ship when, with a flash and roar, the four guns of the two turrets came back into the fight with renewed vigor.

But now the two powerful Blue cruisers—which

CLEARING THE SEAS

had been hanging on the outskirts of the fight like terriers watching a struggle between mastiffs—came slipping forward, creeping closer and closer to the *Alaska*.

To have brought them into the fight when the American dreadnought's fighting power was unimpaired would have been a bad move on the part of the Blues, but now that the *Alaska's* attention was wholly taken up with the two battle-ships, and she could spare few or no guns to meet the attacks of fresh adversaries, it was the precise moment for the cruisers to strike.

Swiftly they sped into range, and swiftly their lighter guns flashed into action.

The decks of the American ship were literally swept by a rain of steel. No human thing could stand upon the decks and live, and even the protections of bridge and superstructure amounted to little.

One by one the sensitive points of the ship were paralyzed. The wireless station was destroyed by a perfectly timed 10-inch shell. A larger projectile from one of the battle-ships burst in the wheel-room, and from that moment the great ship had to be steered from the auxiliary steering-apparatus located below the protective deck.

The small guns mounted on the superstructure and masts had all been either destroyed or silenced by the wiping out of their crews, and not half the guns of the broadside batteries were still firing.

DEFEAT OF THE "ALASKA"

Some dim comprehension of this reached the men in the turret. Joe threw himself into his work with a sort of frenzy. It seemed to him that to wrench with all his strength at the lever of the rammer was to help the crippled, wounded ship in her losing fight.

He knew that the *Alaska* was nearing the end of a hopeless struggle, and that defeat was a matter of minutes. He forgot that odds at which she had fought, forgot the element of danger to himself and the rest of the crew, forgot everything save the one overpowering fact that an American war-ship was being beaten and that he would be forced to witness the triumph of the foe.

"We're beaten!" he cried, unconscious that he had spoken aloud.

Even as he spoke the whole floor of the turret lurched, and there was a splintering, splitting explosion that made the sounds of the bursting shells seem like the popping of toy guns by comparison.

"The magazines!" cried three or four of the men.

Through the smoke-filled air of the turret Joe caught a glimpse of Pat Kelly's face as the grizzled Irishman shouted at his men:

"Every man stand by!" bellowed the veteran turret captain. "We'll fire these guns as long as they give us a grain of powder or we have a piece of a ship to stand on!"

The head and shoulders of a man suddenly

CLEARING THE SEAS

popped up through the manhole leading into the turret from the deck. How the man had ever managed to cross the open deck and live was a mystery. His face was black with powder and daubed with blood, and blood was streaming from a cut in his neck where a flying splinter had just flicked him as it screamed by.

"Stand by to repel boarders!" he yelled; then, with a side glance of explanation at the turret officer, "'Phones and speaking-tubes all smashed, sir!"

From the battered turrets, the shell-swept gun-deck, the twisted wreck of the superstructure, and the stifling caverns of the fire-rooms, where the stokers had for the past half-hour been splashing about in a couple of inches of water, the *Alaska* spewed up haggard, blackened, blood-stained men to meet the final rush of the Blue attack.

Somewhere in the mad rush to the deck Joe caught hold of a cutlass. It was good to feel the grip of the weapon between his fingers, to be out of the stifling, dim confinement of the turret and in the open air.

But the sight that met his eyes as he, with a swarm of other tattered figures, swept out over the forecastle was one that almost sickened him.

A few hours before he had left the deck of the *Alaska* storm-swept but whole. Now he was looking at a ruin. What had been a splendid ship, glorying in her strength, was no more than a battered mass of twisted steel.

DEFEAT OF THE "ALASKA"

But there was no time for viewing the scars of battle, for not more than a few hundred yards away was the lean, rakish Blue cruiser, sliding in for the last stroke of the great fight, her rail lined with Blue sailors and marines, her guns silent but threatening as she closed in.

From the bridge of the approaching ship came a sharp hail, "Have you struck?"

One of the *Alaska's* officers (Captain Scarlett was in the surgeon's hands below) rushed to the rail to answer, but the yells of the crew as they brandished their weapons and shook their fists was all the answer the Blue officer needed.

Joe was dimly conscious of the grinding of steel as the two vessels came together, of the air full of blue-clad shapes, then came a swift rush of men, the clash of weapons and a popping of rifles and revolvers. He threw himself forward, striking out blindly at the blue-clad shapes that came swarming upon the survivors of the *Alaska's* crew from every quarter.

He instinctively ducked under the sweeping slash of a cutlass, struck aside another with his own weapon, and caught a glimpse of Ted tugging at the jammed breech-block of a rifle.

The next instant his foot slipped and he fell heavily, striking his head against a stanchion with such force that consciousness flicked out of him as the flame of a candle goes out in a sudden blast of air.

XII

CAPTURED

WHEN Joe opened his eyes the first thing that struck him was that the steel beams above his head did not look right. They were the wrong color. Then he began to wonder what had become of the ropes of his hammock.

An instant later he realized that he was lying on the berth-deck of a Blue vessel, one of a long row of American prisoners. For a time he lay motionless, his mind going over the details of the fight as he had known it, from the first appearance of the Blue ships to the last wild fight on the broken deck of the *Alaska*.

Finally he moved slightly, and the figure next him rolled over. Joe recognized one of the yeomen attached to the paymaster's department.

They began talking in low tones. Sanders, the yeoman, had seen the end of the fight on the *Alaska*, for he had been disarmed and taken prisoner shortly after the first of the Blue boarders came over the rail.

"We're moving slow," he told Joe, "because we're bringing what's left of the old ship with

CAPTURED

us. They're driving her with her own steam, but it's slow work. The steering-gear's all gone, and they have to run the pumps every second. She'll never make port, and they've got boats ready to get their prize crew off at a second's notice."

"What boat are we on?" Joe asked.

"That slim cruiser that boarded us," answered Sanders. "She's the only one of 'em fit to carry extra passengers. Those two battle-ships aren't much better off than the *Alaska*. I had a good look at 'em. They're scrap-heaps. And the two cruisers aren't pretty, either."

"They hardly got into the fight!" exclaimed Joe.

"I know it," admitted Sanders, "but they must have had plenty while they were in.

"I don't know where these Blues are heading," he went on after a moment; "but the old *Oregon* or a good cruiser could beat what's left of them. If they run foul of one of our ships it can finish the job we started easy enough."

Joe hardly stayed awake long enough to hear the finish of Sanders's last sentence. The natural physical reaction resulting from the unremitting work of the last few hours, and the effects of the blow on his head, made him weak and drowsy. He fell asleep listening to the monotonous tones of the yeoman's voice.

Sometime afterward he was awakened by the touch of a hand on his face, and opened his eyes.

CLEARING THE SEAS

The deck was lighted by incandescent lights. Some of the Americans were sitting up, and blue-clad figures were moving about among them.

A fat man with a round face and a fringe of red beard along his chin was stooping above Joe and feeling of his head. He smiled as Joe opened his eyes.

"Hurt?" he asked.

"Not much," answered Joe.

The doctor nodded brightly and moved on to the next man. Joe watched him moving among the long rows of figures on the deck.

"I wonder," he thought, "if all the Blues are like him?"

He found it hard to feel toward the victors as it seemed that he should feel. Men like the cheery doctor were hard to hate. And the events of the day—gloomy as it was for Joe—increased this feeling.

The Blue sailors made every effort to fraternize with their foes, and those of them who could speak English made friends of the Americans without much seeming trouble. The prisoners were well fed, every one of the wounded was given every possible attention, and their lot was made easy in every way.

But all the kindness in the world could not lighten Joe's heart, on which the defeat rested like a heavy load. He might have gone to one of the open ports and looked at the battered *Alaska*, but he could not bring himself to do it. He did look

CAPTURED

his fill, however, at the other vessels of the Blue fleet, and found that Sanders had not exaggerated. The two battle-ships and the pair of cruisers were all in bad shape, and one of the battle-ships was so badly injured that it had already fallen several miles astern of the other ships.

Of course, Joe lost no time in assuring himself that Ted was not among the prisoners on board the *Aroton*, as he found the swift Blue cruiser was called, nor could he find any one who knew what had become of Brandt.

"There's a chance that he may be on one of the other ships," Sanders told him. "They took some of our boys to one of the battle-ships."

Joe and Sanders formed two of a little circle of the captives which was discussing the probable intentions of the victors. It was hard to guess at the foe's intentions. Even thus early in the terrible struggle the Americans had discovered what they were to learn more fully, and to their greater cost later—that there was little or no chance of foretelling the Blue moves.

"All we know is," a gunner's mate named Swan pointed out, "that their fleet got into American waters before they'd actually declared war, and either made better weather of the storm than we did or got out of its path altogether."

"I'd give a good deal to know where the rest of our ships are," Joe said, and the others nodded quick assent.

"They may be anywhere," Sanders suggested.

CLEARING THE SEAS

"There may have been half a dozen fights like the one we've just come through."

The mere mention of the day's fight was enough to silence all the men. They had lost a battle and lost the ship, which they had learned to care for in the way that sailors of all times have loved their vessels. But worse than that, nearly half the men who had answered roll-call that morning would never answer another. Not a man among the captives but had lost a score of close friends.

Joe spent a wretched night after he stretched out to sleep. His head throbbed and ached, and one terrible dream ended only to plunge him into one that was worse.

Early in the morning he was roused by the steady tooting and blowing of steam-sirens on all sides of him. As he got to his feet he realized that he must have slept through more of the racket than the others, for both the Americans and the Blue marines who had stood guard over them during the night were crowding to the ports.

Before he reached a place from which he could see, Joe knew from the number of whistles that the *Aroton* must have steamed into the midst of a considerable fleet, but he was not prepared for the sight which met his eyes.

The *Aroton* had already dropped anchor, and straight ahead of her, perhaps two miles distant, lay a bleak, rocky coast-line. On every side were Blue ships—battle-ships, cruisers, torpedo craft,

CAPTURED

and (though Joe had to rub his eyes before being sure of the last) a huge fleet of transports.

"Why," he said aloud, "it must be the whole Blue navy!"

A brown-faced Blue seaman, busy cleaning the breech-mechanism of a 6-inch gun that had seen service not many hours before, overheard Joe's exclamation and looked up with a good-natured grin.

"You are surprised—yes?" he asked, in slow, precise English.

Joe nodded without speaking.

The Blue sailor rubbed one big hand over the other and stared thoughtfully out of the open port.

"You people do not understand making war—we do," he said, soberly. "It is not quite fair, I think. You do not have a chance. All this"—and he waved his hand toward the distant coast—"has been planned beforehand. There can be no mistakes. A few weeks, months, perhaps, and we shall be in New York and Washington and the other great cities."

Joe's anger boiled to the surface in spite of the instinctive liking for these big, slow-spoken, good-natured men which he had already formed.

"Don't be too sure," he said. "We gave you a taste of fighting to-day, and just remember that it won't always be six to one!"

The Blue spoke without any sign of temper. "Oh, as to fighting, there is no question," he admitted. "You Americans are splendid fighters.

CLEARING THE SEAS

To-day's battle was no disgrace to your country or your navy. But just fighting doesn't win battles—or wars.

"As you say, we were six to one to-day. That is just it. We will be six to one to-morrow and next week and next year, because we know how. We don't give you the chance for an equal fight. That is good sport, and you Americans are a sporting people, but it is not war, and we are a war-making people. Maybe you understand?"

Joe made no answer. There was nothing that he could say. And the truth was that at the bottom of his heart he did understand more than he liked to admit. War with the Blues was a hard, bitter business, without sentiment or pomp. They fought to win, made successful fighting a business.

No other country in the world, Joe admitted to himself, could have flung a huge fleet across the Atlantic and made an actual descent and landing upon the American coast within a few days of the outbreak of war.

Shortly after breakfast the prisoners were taken up to the deck in batches. No attempt was made by the Blues to prevent their seeing what was going on, and some of the Blues smilingly answered the rather surly questions which were flung at them.

Joe leaned on the rail and stared out at the busy scene. The Blue fleet was lying off a piece of coast (Joe could only guess what coast it was)

CAPTURED

which seemed deserted, but already they were building a veritable city of their own behind the rocks that lined the shore.

Lighters and launches were plying busily back and forth, carrying all sorts of burdens, and from the great number of transports Joe knew that a good-sized army of the famous Blue soldiers was ready to land—if part of it had not already penetrated the interior of the country.

And outside the swarm of transports, stretching north and south in a huge double line, stretched the massive shapes of the Blue ships of war.

"They're the finest fighting-men I've ever dreamed of!" Joe said to himself; "but somehow or other we're going to beat them. We're too big to be beaten like this!"

And down in his heart came the first warm flicker of good spirits and confidence he had felt since he climbed out of the *Alaska's* battered turret.

XIII

WATCHING THE INVADERS

THE next few days passed uneventfully enough for the American prisoners. The men enjoyed a good deal of liberty about the ship, and were allowed to view the operations in the bay as much as they pleased.

But what they longed for was news of their own forces! Their captors were willing enough to talk of the things that might happen, but not one word of the actual occurrences of the past few days would they breathe. Their armies might already be sweeping through New England, or they might have received a decisive check at the hands of the American land forces.

Joe tried to make himself forget the unpleasant side of things by watching the activity of the Blues and trying to guess their plans from what he saw.

That a really great army had already been landed he could not longer doubt. He had seen a considerable force of troops of all arms landed from the transports, and the sounds which he heard at night told him that the work went for-

WATCHING THE INVADERS

ward then as well as in the daytime. Evidently the Blues were establishing a huge base of supplies, close enough to the coast to be protected by the guns of the fleet, yet enabling the invading armies to strike out from it and cover a wide area of the country.

"But what good will all this do them?" demanded Sanders, when Joe had explained his theory. "This land must be part of the New England coast—probably Maine. Suppose they go ahead and establish themselves on shore—what does that get them? They'll have a hard time holding it, and if they do I can't see that they're any better off. One or two states in their hands won't cripple us, and they can't strike far inland. They can't reach New York or Philadelphia."

Joe nodded. "I know that," he said. "It doesn't sound reasonable. But I'm ready to believe that these Blues know just where they're going before they take a step. They're landed here with some definite purpose, and they'd never do it unless they knew just what they were going to do next."

"Then what do you believe?" demanded Sanders.

"I believe they've got some way of striking farther inland and still keeping in touch with their base," Joe said.

Sanders shook his head vigorously. "I don't," he said, stubbornly. "I think they're just overconfident!"

CLEARING THE SEAS

Twenty-four hours later Joe wished he could talk to Sanders again, but it happened that he never laid eyes on the *Alaska's* talkative yeoman again.

Early in the afternoon several large launches headed for the *Aroton*, and the prisoners were taken ashore. Again the Blues showed no concern over what the Americans might see, but led them straight through the great base of supplies.

A little beyond the water's edge the navy's sphere of operation ended and that of the army commenced. The Blue soldiers and the American sailors stared at each other in frank curiosity. Joe looked with interest at the big men in the grayish-blue uniforms and peaked caps, but what held his attention even more were the swarms of men in dingy black clothes which were to be seen on every side. These were the teamsters, mechanics, and "roustabouts" of the invading army, and, while they made no charges and captured no cities, they undoubtedly did the greatest share of the real work of invasion.

During the short walk from the sandy beach to the huge inclosure where the Americans were confined Joe and his companions had a good chance to see what the Blues had been doing. In the few days which had passed since the landing the invaders had built a city, nor was it altogether the proverbial "city of tents." All sorts of portable machinery such as forges, lathes, etc., had been installed and roofed over with little

WATCHING THE INVADERS

knock-down shelters. The popping of gasoline-engines could be heard on every side, while stores of all kinds were piled in huge masses as large as a fair-sized house.

It was impossible to estimate the size of the army itself, because the camp proper lay farther inland than the supply magazines and the workshops; but it was certain that the Blue army was far larger than any force the Americans, with their slower methods of mobilization, could gather against it in several weeks' time.

With their accustomed thoroughness, the Blues had built their prison before they brought their prisoners ashore, and as Joe looked at the canvas and barbed-wire inclosure which might be his home for an indefinite period he felt another flash of admiration for the invaders.

"From what I've read and heard," he said to himself, "we're going to be a lot better cared for than the average prisoner of war."

The prison was nothing more than a rectangle inclosed by a high and strong barbed-wire fence, perhaps two hundred yards long and one hundred yards wide. There were several tents of different sizes, and a row of rather flimsy-looking portable wooden shacks.

A Blue officer explained to the captives the condition under which they might live. They would, of course, have the freedom of the inclosure. They would be fed, and their sick would be properly cared for. A cordon of sentries would surround

CLEARING THE SEAS

the inclosure day and night, and any prisoner attempting to climb the fence would be shot without challenge. An opportunity was given to the few officers to give their parole, but all of them refused the chance.

Joe had not been in the inclosure more than a few minutes when he saw a familiar, "sorrel-topped" figure inspecting one of the wooden shacks. He dashed across the intervening space as fast as his legs would carry him, and an instant later Ted and Joe were pumping each other's hands and shouting at the top of their voices.

As soon as they had exchanged experiences they sat down for a sober discussion of the present situation.

"Of course," Ted began, "we've got to get out of this and lose no time about it."

"Of course," Joe agreed.

"And it looks to me," Ted went on, "as though the Blues don't much care whether we get away or not. It may be easy enough to watch this place in the daytime, but it's going to be a different matter at night."

"We'll have to wait a few days until we see just how things work out," Joe suggested; and his hastier companion was ready to agree with him on this point.

During the day the surviving officers of the *Alaska* organized their men. The question of escape was not discussed, but it was obviously better to restore the ordinary forms of discipline, es-

WATCHING THE INVADERS

tablish watches, apportion the work, and so on, as soon as possible.

There was little dull routine about the first day inside the inclosure. All that a man had to do was to look between the strands of the wire fence to find plenty to hold his attention. All day long the ceaseless activity of the Blues continued. Now it would be a little column of infantry trudging by under the queer peaked caps, again a string of horses for the cavalry lines or a line of supply-wagons.

And everywhere were the men in black, hammering, tugging, piling boxes, loading and unloading carts, repairing broken wheels.

"I believe every one of those black chaps carries a whole kit of carpenter's and blacksmith's tools somewhere in his clothes!" Ted exclaimed.

One thing impressed all of the prisoners. The inhabitants of the district (all of them had by this time taken for granted that it was part of the Maine coast) seemed to have been literally pushed back by the Blue invasion. They had not seen an American face since the morning the *Aroton* dropped anchor.

Throughout the day a line of sentries had stretched clear around the inclosure about fifty yards distant from the fence, and in every group of Americans that formed there had been eager discussions of the possibilities of breaking through that slender line at night.

"If they don't increase the number of sen-

CLEARING THE SEAS

tries," Joe overheard an officer saying, "there certainly is a chance."

About five o'clock in the afternoon, when it was growing dark rapidly, the sentries were changed; but their number was not increased. It was hard to believe that the Blues would be guilty of carelessness, however, and it was no great surprise to Joe when at least twenty huge search-lights blinked out of the darkness and fairly flooded the inclosure with brilliant light.

After the first sharp shock of disappointment the Americans took it good-naturedly enough, and there was a good deal of chaff exchanged between the prisoners and their guards, the Americans detailing mock plans of escape, and the Blue sentries contenting themselves by laughing at their prisoners.

Not long after the lights had been turned on the Americans witnessed a sight which made them temporarily forget the unpleasant nature of their own situation.

All through the day they had heard the spluttering of motors, and had even caught a glimpse of a big, black dirigible balloon. It was certain that the Blues were going to rely on gasoline-motors for a large part of their transport, but not a man in the American camp had an inkling of the truth.

Somewhere around eight o'clock at night there came from beyond a range of sand-hills at one side of the inclosure a series of explosions so loud

WATCHING THE INVADERS

and continuous that most of the prisoners rushed out of their tents, thinking that a machine-gun was being fired.

"It isn't guns," a man near Joe said, suddenly; "it's a gasoline-engine—and just about the biggest one anybody ever heard."

For several seconds the giant motor ran alone, then two others burst out, and a few moments later there came up from behind the sand-hills and into the glare of the search-lights an enormous air-ship, whose huge dimensions made any air-ships previously built seem small by comparison.

Not only was the great gas-bag far larger than the largest Zeppelin balloon, but the car which hung beneath it was an enormous affair with several decks, and in the glare of the lights it could be seen that it was packed with men and guns.

Slowly but smoothly the great mass bored its way up into the air, exchanged signals with the Blue army beneath it, passed out of the light, and vanished, the beat of its huge motors gradually dying away in the distance.

Joe and Ted had been standing side by side, and when the huge mass had finally disappeared they looked at each other in stunned silence.

"By George!" gasped Joe, and then, unable to think of any other thing to say, "By George!"

"Why, they can carry a small army in one of those things!" exclaimed Ted.

"Of course they can," replied Joe, "and we don't know how many of them they've got. No

CLEARING THE SEAS

wonder they struck the Maine coast! They don't need to attack the big towns by sea. With those balloons they can drop armies down wherever they please—and I don't see how we're going to stop them!"

As the two walked back to their tent Joe realized for the first time the huge strength and resourcefulness of the foe with which his country had grappled.

XIV

THE ESCAPE

THE American prisoners soon dropped into a monotonous rut of existence. They were completely cut off from their own people, ignorant of the progress of the war, and without seeming hope of escape. The officers openly discouraged the wild plans which the men made.

Lieutenant Chafin, of the *Alaska*, a man whose courage was absolutely beyond question, made no bones of the fact that he thought any attempt to escape was sheer folly.

"If any one man or group of men had a really fair show of getting away," he pointed out, "of course they ought to take it. But with things as they are at present, any concerted action on our part is foolish. At the most only a few of us would get through, and the chances are that every one of us would be shot before he got a hundred yards from the fence. And each of you is worth a lot more to the United States alive—even though a prisoner—than he is dead! There's always the chance of exchange, and we've got to wait for that."

CLEARING THE SEAS

The men accepted this advice rather sullenly, but they had to admit its soundness. The simple nature of their prison really increased the difficulty of getting out of it.

So, when one afternoon, nearly a week after they had been marched through the gate in the huge pen, Ted whispered in Joe's ear, "We're going to get out of here to-night!" Joe thought that his comrade must have lost his senses.

"What do you mean?" Joe demanded. "Is there to be an exchange?"

"Not as far as I know," answered Ted. "But I've found a way out. These Blues are clever people, but they're human, and they've made a mistake. Of course we'll be running a risk of being shot, but I actually think it can be done."

"How many of us?"

"Just you and I."

"That doesn't seem fair to the rest," Joe objected.

"I know it doesn't," admitted Ted, "but every one we add increases the risk. I'm going to tell the First Luff [Lieutenant Chafin] just before we slip out. I'll leave a note that he won't get until we're gone."

Joe's heart had commenced to beat faster. "Let's hear the plan," he demanded.

"About half past ten," explained Ted, "the Blues relieve the men at the search-lights. Either one of the men in that second shift doesn't know

THE ESCAPE

his business or there's something the matter with his eyes. He swings his light around so that, instead of just touching the glare from the next one, it leaves a space about ten or twelve feet wide between the two that's as black as your hat. Now I believe we two can crawl down that long patch of shadow without being seen."

"But the fence! We never could climb that without being picked off!"

"We aren't going to climb it," answered Joe. "The ground is soft and I think we can dig under. Carry your knife and spoon away from mess to-night."

"Suppose the same man isn't on the light?"

Ted grunted. "What a wet blanket you are!" he exclaimed. "If he isn't there to-night, we'll just have to wait till he is."

They found no difficulty in carrying their spoons and knives away from mess that night, or in slipping out of the tent which they shared with twelve others, and hiding in a place from which they could watch the play of the lights.

But even as Joe had feared, they were doomed to disappointment. There was no careless handling of the lights, and no path of shadow over which they could wriggle their way to the fence. At three o'clock in the morning, stiff and cold from their long vigil, they gave up, and Ted had to risk discovery in regaining possession of the note he had left for Lieutenant Chaffin.

For three nights the long vigil was repeated,

CLEARING THE SEAS

and both boys were beginning to suffer from lack of sleep.

"We can't go on this way," Joe said. "We'll be caught by some of the others, and they'll all be so anxious to get out, the whole plan will be spoiled. Your man came on the other night at the first shift. Suppose we quit watching after the end of the first shift? We've got to have sleep."

This plan was agreed upon, and it was further decided that they should take turns in watching, while the inconvenient note to the Lieutenant was not to be left until they were sure that the attempt could be made.

Three nights later Joe was sleeping soundly—it being Ted's night to watch—when a hand reached under the wall of the tent and gripped him by the leg. Joe was awake in an instant. He assured himself that the rest of the men were sound asleep, secured his knife and spoon, put the note under his blanket, and crawled out into the night.

It was intensely cold and still, but the inclosure was as light as day, and Joe's heart rather failed him at the thought of the attempt they were about to make. Keeping himself hidden as much as possible, he crawled toward the point where the shadow between the two lights crossed the inclosure, and where he knew he would find Ted waiting for him.

His progress was necessarily slow, for there was

THE ESCAPE

little cover, and to be seen crawling about the line of tents at this time of night would certainly arouse the suspicions of the Blue sentries and increase their watchfulness.

"All quiet?" whispered Ted, as they met.

"Guess so," answered Joe. "Wish we could be as sure that the Blues haven't seen us yet."

"That's the chance we take," Ted answered.

"Come on; there's no use wasting time."

The crawl to the fence was not particularly hard nor dangerous. The broad path of shadow was indeed black, and the chance of detection was slight so long as the lights were not shifted. And even if they were shifted, Ted and Joe were in no actual danger, for the Blues would not fire unless they actually attempted to cross the fence.

"Don't get too close to the fence," Joe whispered, as they crawled forward. "If we hit one of those wires and set it to creaking the stuff's off!"

They crawled to within a few inches of the fence, then lay perfectly still and listened. They could plainly see the figures of the sentries and see them moving about. Fortunately they did not move much. After assuring themselves as far as they could that the Blues suspected nothing, Ted and Joe got out their inadequate tools and commenced to dig.

Fortunately the frost had not got into the ground, but with no tools but case-knives and pewter spoons it was hard, slow work, for it was

CLEARING THE SEAS

necessary to dig a hole deep enough to slide under the fence without touching the lowest strand of wire.

Only once did they stop work, and that was when Ted asked, suddenly, "What time is the next shift?"

"Twelve-thirty," replied Joe.

After an hour's hard, cramping work the burrow under the fence was finished. Ted crawled through first, and Joe followed him, fairly holding his breath. Once Joe felt his shoulders hit softly against the wire, but he flattened himself out in time and the wire did not squeak or rattle.

They were now within fifty yards of the sentries, and the real danger of the attempt was just beginning. Hugging the ground as closely as they could, hitching themselves forward with toes and elbows, and only raising their heads slightly to assure themselves that they were keeping to the shadow, they wriggled over the ground a few inches at a time.

Louder and clearer sounded the low tones of the sentries, and Joe could hear the tinkle of metal as one of the men shifted his position slightly.

It seemed impossible that they could crawl through the cordon unseen, and the closer they crawled to the line of sentries the greater became the need of caution. The least sound on their part, or a move of a dozen feet by one of the two sentries standing closest to the path of shadow, and they were lost.

THE ESCAPE

Joe had to fight against a wild desire to get to his feet and run. A hundred yards farther ahead lay temporary safety. It was such a ridiculously short distance; he could run it in a few seconds—yet he knew that he must continue his painful crawl, and that it would be nearly half an hour before he could risk drawing a long breath.

According to a prearranged plan, Joe paused every few seconds to avoid the danger of running into Ted in the darkness. He realized that he could not hear his companion, and this thought comforted him, for if he could not hear it was not likely that the Blues could, either.

He did not actually realize that he had done the seemingly impossible thing and got through the line until he discovered that the voices of the two men, which had sounded from in front, now sounded from behind him. The shock of this discovery almost brought disaster, for he unconsciously increased his speed and nearly sprawled over Ted. Had his groping fingers not struck the heel of Ted's shoe the collision would certainly have caused noise enough to attract the attention of the Blues.

Once past the line, it was harder than ever to maintain the painfully slow crawl, and the temptation to get up and run was almost irresistible.

But Joe forced himself to go ahead until the sentries were fully fifty yards behind them, then reached out and caught Ted's leg.

CLEARING THE SEAS

"Now what?" he asked in a whisper.

"We've got to strike for the beach," Ted answered. "If we head the other way we'll get into the camps and won't have a chance."

"We can't crawl any closer to the lights," Joe pointed out.

"I know it," replied Ted. "The best thing we can do is to go on this way a bit farther, then make a break for it. There's a patch of bushes not much more than a hundred yards from where we are now. I don't know what's beyond it, but it's in the general direction of the shore, and that's the way we've got to go. Just follow me.

"If either of us is hit," Ted added, an instant later, "what then?"

Joe hesitated for a moment. "The other goes on," he said.

They resumed their crawl, and after they had gone perhaps a hundred feet Ted leaped suddenly to his feet. "Now for it!" he said.

Joe was after him like a flash, and the relief of stretching his legs in a run after the long crawl was grateful. But before he had taken a dozen strides hoarse calls sounded behind him, a rifle cracked, and a bullet hummed through the air overhead.

Lowering his head, Joe commenced dodging from side to side as he ran, his eyes never leaving Ted's figure. He was more excited and frightened than he had been during the battle. Every instant he expected a bullet to strike him from



JOE AND TED ALMOST PLUNGED INTO A GROUP OF BLUE INFANTRYMEN



THE ESCAPE

behind or the figures of Blue soldiers to spring out of the ground in front of him.

A sudden crash of underbrush in front of him told plainly enough that Ted had reached the shelter of the thicket, and an instant later Joe plunged headlong into the bushes.

Without pausing the pair plunged straight forward. For a few yards the bushes grew thicker.

"We've hit the right place," panted Joe. "They'll have hard work getting after us here!"

Then, without warning, the bushes thinned out and ceased, and Joe and Ted checked their headlong pace just in time to keep from plunging out into the open—and almost into a small fire around which sat a group of Blue infantrymen!

XV

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

QUICK thinking is not always sufficient to pull people out of tight places, and when one danger follows on the heels of another, and one seems to be simply jumping from the frying-pan into the fire, thinking of all kinds is likely to give place to instinct.

When Joe and Ted emerged from the thicket to find themselves almost in the clutches of Blue soldiers, they turned and dashed back into the shelter of the bushes as a rabbit turns from the hunter in front of him and dashes back toward the bellowing hound which is following his trail.

The two boys had no idea which way to turn; they were simply trying to avoid the danger which lay directly in front of them. It did not seem to Joe that there was any possibility of making their escape. They had not the slightest knowledge of the country which surrounded them, nor of the extent of the Blue encampment. It might be that they were on the edge of the invaders' camp; but it seemed far more likely that the prison-pen would have been built in the very center of it.

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

But one thing was certain. Whatever course they took they had no more than a few seconds in which to decide.

"Let's keep under cover and work over toward the right," Joe urged.

And without another word they began making their way through the underbrush at right angles to their original course of flight. Behind them they could hear the sounds of the growing pursuit, and on the other side of the screening timber they caught the occasional flicker of fires. It was certain that the Blues were on both sides of them, but for a ways, at least, the belt of scrubby timber seemed free from the hostile troops.

They tried to combine speed with caution, but this was well-nigh impossible, for the ground was covered with fallen leaves and branches, and it would have required more self-possession than either Joe or Ted possessed to move slowly.

"The worst of it is," Ted said, when they slackened speed for a little to get their breath, "this is the one place they'll be apt to look for us. It's the only cover near the inclosure."

"Can't help that," answered Joe. "It's the only place we could have come that would have let us get this far away, and we'll just have to hope that we can get farther."

Joe had broken into a trot again, and was running a few yards behind Ted, whose longer legs enabled him to keep in the lead. Suddenly there was a sharper crackle of branches. Joe

CLEARING THE SEAS

thought that the Blues must be actually upon them—when he realized that Ted's dim figure had vanished, and that the sounds of his companion's progress had abruptly ceased.

"Ted!" he called, softly, but there was no answer.

Cautiously Joe pushed forward through the shrubbery, utterly at a loss to understand what had happened, and conscious that their pursuers were already close to the point at which they had first entered the timber.

Before he had taken more than a few paces, one foot failed to touch solid ground as he brought it down. Had he not been expecting something of the sort, he would have plunged headlong. As it was, he sat down quickly and began to crawl and slip forward. He had been on the lip of a steep ravine which, in the darkness, he had been unable to see.

Again he called Ted, and this time a smothered voice answered him—almost at his side.

"Are you hurt?" Joe asked.

"Knocked the wind out of me," admitted Ted; "but I guess nothing's broken."

And Ted's figure, dirty and torn, but otherwise uninjured, rose out of a patch of bushes. They crawled cautiously the rest of the way down the sharp slope, then paused an instant at the bottom of the ravine.

"We'd better strike toward the water," Joe insisted. "They've probably got patrols along

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

the beach, but they won't be as thick there as they will the other way, because the Blues aren't looking for any attack from that side."

This seemed as good a plan as any, and they followed it without delay. Instead of attempting to climb the other side of the ravine they struck along its bottom, where rains had left a narrow path of firm sand, and their progress was both swifter and more silent.

Without warning the ravine took a sudden sharp turn to the right, due evidently to some rocky formation which lay in the natural course of the drainage water. Joe welcomed this change of direction with an exclamation of delight, for he had a feeling that only by bearing steadily to the right could they possibly hope to escape.

Presently the ravine grew shallower, and before long the fugitives came out into open ground. They stopped at once and listened. Hard as it was to believe, their pursuers seemed to have gone wrong. They could hear whistles and calls behind them, but they knew that they had gained ground, for they would certainly have been able to hear any Blue soldiers making their way through the tangle of the scrubby timber.

But they were far from being out of danger yet, for the point at which they had left the ravine was only a couple of hundred yards distant from another part of the Blue lines.

Running almost doubled over, Ted and Joe started again toward the steady sound of thun-

CLEARING THE SEAS

dering surf. Both of them were glad to be out of the ravine, for, although it had undoubtedly made their temporary escape possible, it had been a creepy sort of a place, too much, as Joe said afterward, like running through a tunnel ahead of a train.

For a short distance the ground was level and smooth, but it soon began to rise again, and the slope became so sharp that they were forced to stop a second time to rest.

"I don't think they're going to catch us," Joe announced. "Either the lights confused them at the start and they didn't know which way we went, or they turned to the left in the timber instead of to the right. But getting out is going to be another matter. If all the Blues that we've seen are still camped close to the coast, we're going to stumble over them sure."

Ted suddenly caught his arm. "Listen!" he said.

Joe strained his ears and caught a faint, whistling, whimpering sound overhead. "Wild ducks!" he exclaimed.

"Just what it is," agreed Ted, "and that means that there's marshland somewhere near us. Come on! We don't want daylight to catch us in a swamp."

They hurried forward again, but before they had gone a quarter of a mile they knew why the Blue search-parties had gone to the left instead of to the right. First Ted and then Joe struck

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

soft, springy ground that would not bear their weight. Again and again they tried to find a path, only to find the footing worse and worse.

At the end of a few minutes they gave up and sat down in despair. As far as they could see in both directions an impassable marsh stretched across their path. They were as thoroughly blocked as though they had run into the Great Wall of China!

XVI

THE DUCK-HUNTER'S LAUNCH

THERE seemed nothing for it but to sit down and wait for daylight where they were. Daylight would undoubtedly bring the Blues, but recapture was infinitely better than drowning in the sticky black mud of the marsh.

"And there's just a chance," Joe said, "that when it gets light we can see a way through the marsh."

For a time the pair sat huddled up behind a patch of bushes, shivering in the night wind, cold, wretched, and pretty thoroughly discouraged. Finally Joe got to his feet.

"We'll freeze if we sit still," he said. "We might just as well keep moving, and we may strike something. Let's work down toward the water."

Never was ground given a more thorough inspection than the mile of teetering, unstable bog that lay between them and the sea. Again and again they thought they had found a path, for little fingers of solid ground stretched out into the marsh at intervals. Ted followed one of these fully two hundred yards, only to come within an

THE DUCK-HUNTER'S LAUNCH

ace of stepping into a black water-hole at the end of it.

As they backed away from the treacherous spot, Ted pointed to what seemed to be a patch of bushes. "Somebody else has been here," he said. "See that duck-blind?"

"Let's use it," replied Joe. "It will be a whole lot warmer than any other shelter we're likely to find, and we'll be pretty well hidden."

They crawled into the flimsy shelter, and found that their find was indeed a lucky one, for the blind was floored with planks and covered with straw, while its sides were thickly enough woven to break the force of the wind to a great extent.

In spite of the excitement and strain of the night, the two had not been curled up in the blind for more than a few minutes before both of them were sound asleep. It was several hours later when Joe was aroused by Ted's hand shaking his shoulder steadily.

"Don't move or speak," Ted hissed in his ear, as soon as Joe's wriggle and faint grunt of protest showed that he was awake; "they're after us!"

Joe was wide awake at once. Carefully he sat up, biting his lips to keep from groaning as he straightened his stiffened muscles. It was intensely dark and very cold, but the wind, which had blown steadily earlier in the night, had fallen and it was very still except for the steady booming of the surf. Above this dull booming Joe's ear

CLEARING THE SEAS

caught the sound of some one coming toward them through the brittle marsh-grass.

Presently Joe caught sight of a moving figure, which loomed gigantic in the dim light. He could only see the vague outline, but it showed him a peaked cap and a gun angling up from the figure's shoulder.

"He doesn't know we're here," he whispered to Ted. "Wait till he gets close, then jump. You grab his legs and I'll hold him so he can't call the rest of them."

Had Joe been less excited it would have struck him as very peculiar that a Blue soldier would come striding out into the dangerous marsh—and more, that he should come straight as an arrow toward the place where they were hidden. But the continued fear of capture and the strain of their flight had made Joe's mind work in a single direction.

With tense muscles and hammering hearts Ted and Joe waited while the vague figure came striding toward them, all unconscious of their presence. When the man was not more than a couple of paces from the blind they leaped to their feet and fell on him like a pair of savages.

So sudden was the onslaught that the man had no chance to defend himself. Ted's arms closed around his legs like a vise; one of Joe's arms went round his neck, and the other hand was clapped over his mouth. The three of them went down in a writhing heap, Ted and Joe uppermost.

THE DUCK-HUNTER'S LAUNCH

"Gag him, quick!" gasped Ted.

Joe shifted his position to get one arm free, and his groping fingers closed on the man's gun, which had fallen close to him in the struggle. Instead of a stocky, wooden-cased military rifle, Joe was astounded to find himself holding a double-barreled shot-gun.

"Wait a minute!" ordered Joe, and took his hand from their captive's mouth.

"Lemme up!" gasped a voice in such English as no Blue could possibly speak. "I surrender!"

Ted and Joe were on their feet in an instant, and had pulled the other upright.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the man. "I thought you were Blues!"

"And we thought you were!" Ted and Joe answered in the same breath.

All three of them sat down again in the blind. Their "captive" proved to be a tall, lank man, dressed in hip-boots, canvas hunting-clothes, and a peaked hunting-cap. He was so frightened that he was trembling from head to foot, and it was a few minutes before he could speak.

His name, he told them, was John Edmands, and he lived in a cabin on the other side of the marsh, making his living by fishing in summer and hunting in the fall.

"Yes," he said, in answer to their eager questions, "the country's full of these here Blues, but they ain't bothered me none. I've kept right on with my ducking. This is one of my blinds, and

CLEARING THE SEAS

I was just coming to it when you two jumped on me!"

In a few words Joe told their story, and Edmands was quick to come to their help.

"You come with me," he said, "and I'll have you across the marsh in two jerks."

As they followed him the boys realized how slim would have been their chance of ever getting out of the marsh alive had they attempted to cross it without a guide. There was a path, but only a man who knew every inch of the ground could have followed it. And once even Edmands was slightly at fault, and had to retrace his steps for some little distance.

They twisted and turned, doubled on their course, making now toward the sea and now away from it, skirting salt ponds from which the ducks went thundering up in clamoring, quacking clouds, and finally reaching firmer ground. A few minutes later a light glimmered through the trees in front of them.

"That's my house," Edmands told them, "and I'm going to feed you up good before I send you along."

They sat on the edge of the duck-shooter's bunk while he busied himself around the stove making coffee and frying bacon and flapjacks, and afterward they ate as though it was the last meal they expected to have for some time. Then they leaned back in their chairs and discussed their situation.

THE DUCK-HUNTER'S LAUNCH

Edmands gave them such information as he could. He knew that there had been a number of naval battles, and that most of the Maine coast was blockaded by the invading fleet. He had heard that the Blue army had spread over a good deal of the northern part of the state.

"Living alone down here," he said, "I don't get much news. Everybody that could get away has cleared out. I haven't seen anybody I know for three days."

"I don't see," Ted said, finally, "just how we're going to get away and get anywhere. With the country full of Blues, we haven't one chance in a hundred of slipping through."

"Know how to run a gasoline-engine?" Edmands asked, suddenly.

"I guess I can make one go," Ted said.

"Then maybe you can make it in my old launch," the duck-hunter said. "I can't go into the army because I've got a bad leg, but maybe that old tub of mine will do some good. And, anyhow, the Blues 'll probably get it if you don't. She ain't fast, but she'll keep going if you give her gas enough. And unless the wind gets into the northeast before night—which ain't likely—she'll take any sea you'll hit."

Fifteen minutes later the three of them followed a path down to a shed on the bank of a narrow, deep creek, and the rays from Edmands's lantern showed them a stubby, broad-beamed little launch with a one-cylinder engine.

CLEARING THE SEAS.

"She ain't much to look at," the hunter admitted; "but she certainly will do the work! There's a tank of fresh water in the stern, and I'll get you some grub."

Edmands stood on the rickety pier and watched them start a few minutes later.

"Creek's clear as a whistle all the way to the bay," he told them. "Keep her a quarter of a mile offshore and you're all right. Leave her somewhere if you can. Good luck to you! I guess it's up to you sailor chaps to handle these Blues. They sure are making it hot for us on shore!"

Not long afterward the plodding launch stuck its blunt nose out of the mouth of the creek, and Joe headed her against the long rollers of the Atlantic.

XVII

THE TORPEDO-BOAT

HOUR after hour the sturdy launch chugged its way through the water. The engine gave them no trouble, and the craft lived up to its owner's promise of being thoroughly seaworthy. It rolled a good deal, but shipped so little water that occasional bailing was all that was needed.

Ted and Joe were constantly on the lookout for Blue war-ships, and they had been at sea only a short time before they discovered that Edmands's tale of a blockade of the coast had been no exaggeration, for they saw the search-lights of half a dozen ships. Fortunately, the Blue vessels were keeping well out from shore, and the tiny launch was far outside the range of their lights.

The fugitives had made no definite plan, their one idea being to put as many miles as possible behind them before they attempted a landing. The chances were that the coast for fifty miles at least would be dangerous for them, and they hoped that their supply of fuel would be sufficient to take them much farther south. They deter-

CLEARING THE SEAS

mined, if possible, to move only at night, hiding in some sheltered creek or bay during the day.

"We simply can't take any chances with the Blues," Joe said. "If one of their vessels sights us we'll be caught sure. We've slipped through their fingers once, but it was nothing but luck that pulled us through, and that sort of luck doesn't happen twice to the same people!"

When the sky commenced to turn gray in the east they made for shore. It was necessary to cruise cautiously along for more than an hour before they could find the sort of landing-place they wanted. They passed a little fishing-village, but dared not go in for fear it might be in the hands of the invaders.

All through the bleak, cold day they lay in the launch, covered by a couple of old blankets. The boat itself was well concealed by bushes and boughs which they had piled over it.

Nothing of any consequence occurred during the day. They saw several vessels some distance out at sea, but too far away for them to make certain whether they were Blue or American ships. They saw no one along the shore—which was not unnatural, for they had selected a bleak and desolate-looking spot for their hiding-place.

They slept during most of the day, keeping watch turn and turn about. About the middle of the afternoon it turned much colder, and the wind freshened. Joe, who was on watch at the time, observed these things uneasily.

THE TORPEDO-BOAT

"I don't like the looks of things," he was forced to admit to himself.

But at dusk, when they made their preparations for again putting to sea, there were no indications of ugly weather, and they slipped out of the cove through waves not much larger than those which the launch had ridden easily enough during the night.

"Either we find more gasoline soon," Ted called to Joe, as they smashed out through the waves, "or this cruise is a short one! She'll eat up the gas in a sea like this. We've got just about enough for three hours."

"Then let's make all we can in three hours!" Joe called back. "Or, better yet, let's push on till we see lights on shore, then run in close and wait till morning."

Could they have followed this plan, their subsequent experiences, while they might have been just as exciting, would not have contained perhaps the worst night that either Ted or Joe was ever called upon to go through. But they were destined to find that, staunch as she was, the duck-shooter's craft was by no means a sea-going vessel.

As soon as they had decided upon their course, Ted turned the boat's prow toward the shore. Both of them knew that to venture closer was to run the risk of shoals and submerged rocks, but some risk simply had to be taken, and this seemed the lesser of two evils.

CLEARING THE SEAS

At the end of half an hour a suspicion had fastened upon Joe's mind, but he said nothing, and contented himself by watching the engine.

Presently Ted hailed him from the bow. "Open her up a bit, Joe," he called. "We're not breaking any speed records."

"All right," answered Joe.

He did not say that the boat was already making the best speed of which she was capable, and that the throttle was wide open, while the spark was advanced as far as it would go. But he knew that instead of making headway the launch was actually losing ground.

Ted turned around in his seat in the bow. "Do you know what's happening?" he cried.

"I've known it for fifteen minutes," answered Joe.

Both were silent for a time. The situation was serious enough as it was; the real seriousness would come if the offshore wind increased in violence.

"It's bad business," admitted Joe; "but we might as well save gasoline. I'll shut her down as much as I can and still keep head on her, and you pull against the wind with your wheel as much as you dare."

"I can't hold her over much," protested Ted. "These waves are beginning to slap pretty hard."

"I know it," replied Joe; "but if we save our gas and the wind lets up we'll be better off than we will to buck it and stand still until the engine dies on us."

THE TORPEDO-BOAT

So commenced what was bound to be a losing fight. Joe shut off most of the power, driving the engine just enough so that the boat would answer the rudder easily, and Ted did what he could to combat the steady thrust of the wind. Even in the gathering darkness, however, they could see that they were being blown to sea all too rapidly.

For a time it was no more serious than that, but before long, Ted's efforts to make some progress to the south got them into fresh difficulties. The launch began to yaw and slip into the trough of the waves.

"No use!" shouted Ted. "We'll have to run before the wind. I can't keep her out of the trough any longer."

While Ted was wrenching at the wheel with all his strength, Joe busied himself rigging up what protection he could for the engine against the following seas, which were bound, sooner or later, to come tumbling aboard. When he had done all that was possible with a tarpaulin, the blankets which they had used, and a piece of sail-cloth he found in a locker, he made his way forward and relieved Ted at the wheel.

Before long they had shipped enough water to make bailing necessary, although the engine was still running. Bailing, however, was no easy matter. One man had to be at the engine, for the waves were now lifting the propeller clear of the water at times, and the racing screw had to be checked,

CLEARING THE SEAS

Joe knelt amidships with the big bailing-can, steering as best he could by reaching over one side or the other of the boat, and tugging at the tiller-ropes. This was unsatisfactory at best, but no other method was possible.

Finally a wave came tumbling along behind them, smashed against the stern, and tore away part of the covering which protected the engine.

"Get forward and bring her about!" cried Joe. "We'll have to hit these waves head on!"

Even though they waited for their chance, they nearly swamped in coming about, and the instant they headed into the teeth of the wind and waves, the launch began to pitch so wildly that for a moment they thought she was going under at once. But she did ride the waves, although sluggish as a soaked plank.

Their hope of keeping the engine going proved futile, for they could no longer prevent the seas from occasionally slashing in at some point, and after a few half-hearted, sputtering pops the engine absolutely refused to give another explosion.

Nor could the boys spare time to try to keep it running. Their whole strength was taken up with the tremendous task of keeping the boat out of the trough and keeping it afloat. They supplemented the rudder (which could not be wholly depended upon with the engine dead) with a long-handled, broad-bladed paddle which had been strapped under one of the bench-seats running along the side. Again and again the

THE TORPEDO-BOAT

launch swung round into the trough, and as many times, by frantic work with the bailing-cans, the boys kept her afloat.

Never in all his life had Joe Lawton worked as during those hours. Even in the *Alaska's* first and last fight there had been slight pauses, tiny intervals of time in which he could stop to draw breath or wipe the streaming moisture from his face. But there was no such relief now. Their struggle was well-nigh hopeless at the best—and it would end the instant either of them faltered or became exhausted.

They worked in absolute silence. There was no necessity for them to speak. When the inrush of water demanded it they dropped rudder and paddle, seized the cans and bailed frantically until the swinging of the sodden craft forced them back to the clumsy steering-gear again.

But unceasing as was the muscular effort, it left Joe's mind perfectly free. He knew the danger they were facing. He knew that the chances were a hundred to one against the launch living through the night unless the wind fell suddenly. Facing death here in a small open boat was a different thing from facing it in the steel-walled turret of the battle-ship. There had been excitement and the furious lust of battle to make him forget the danger. Here was nothing of that sort to help him. He had to look squarely into the face of it.

He could not help thinking of all that lay be-

CLEARING THE SEAS

hind him, of the life he had lived before the great tornado which left him a penniless orphan, of the strange interview in his uncle's office, his sudden resolve, and the months of hard work that had followed the taking of that resolve.

"If I'd wanted to," he thought, "I might be in some Eastern college right this minute, with all the money I wanted, and not a care in the world."

He looked up for an instant as he strained the knotted muscles of his back and pushed against the bending paddle until his arms seemed about to crack with the strain. His eye took in the black, rushing water, the dim outline of the launch, and Ted's bent figure toiling with the old powder-can with might and main.

In that instant Joe's heart swelled with pride and new courage. Whatever the end, he knew that he had taken the right course, that the life he had chosen was a man's life, and that he had met it squarely.

"Anyhow, Ted," he sang out, his voice carrying clear above the rush of the water and the whistle of the wind, "we've made a pretty good fight of it!"

Ted's answer was unexpected. "There's something coming this way!" he shouted.

Joe did not dare turn his head to look. There was no flicker of light on the water, nor did his ear catch any sounds but those of the storm, the clank of Ted's bailing-can as it struck against

THE TORPEDO-BOAT

a thwart, or the bumping of his paddle against the gunwale of the launch.

Yet after a bit it did seem to him as though his ears caught a low, rhythmic throbbing. At first he decided that this was either the beating of his heart or a freak of his imagination; but a little later the sound became too clear-cut and distinct to leave any doubt in his mind. Some vessel equipped with powerful engines was moving either toward them or almost parallel with their course.

Ted turned so that he could look out over the tossing water without stopping his bailing. "Not a light," he said, "not even running-lights! Whatever it is, she either doesn't want to be seen or is mighty certain of a clear course!"

Both Ted and Joe raised their voices in a long-drawn hail, although there seemed little chance of the sound carrying. Then they listened. The distant engines continued—beat-beat-beat without altering their speed or seeming to alter their course. Again and again the boys shouted. The sound of the engines did not seem to grow fainter, but it suddenly ceased altogether.

Either Ted and Joe had somewhat relaxed their attention in their efforts to hail the mysterious vessel which had come so close to them, or the wave which suddenly flung its weight against the staggering launch was more powerful than any of those which had yet struck them. Without an instant's warning they found themselves up to their ankles in water; both bailing-cans, the pad-

CLEARING THE SEAS

dle, and everything movable went over the side of the launch, and the boat settled heavily into the water.

Joe expected to see it go under at once, but it retained sufficient buoyancy to float, although the water was within an inch or two of the decks at each end. Joe tore at his heavy shoes and caught a glimpse of Ted doing the same. He knew that he could not swim either long or far in such a sea, but he would not give up until the end.

The next instant another big wave came thundering down on the launch. Ted and Joe did not have time for the exchange of a word; both leaped clear of the sinking launch an instant before the wave struck them.

Joe braced himself to meet the shock of the icy water. The first wave carried him under, and when he came to the surface hope deserted him for the first time. He would not give up without a struggle, but that struggle could only end in one way. The point where the launch went down must have been several miles offshore, and even in smooth water a strong swimmer could not combat the chill of the water more than a few minutes.

"Ted!" he shouted, as soon as he could get his breath.

"All right!" came Ted's voice from a short distance away.

"Let's stick close together as long as we can!" Joe called.

THE TORPEDO-BOAT

There was no answer, but Joe knew that Ted was merely saving his strength for the fight. Both commenced to swim, and Joe imagined that they were making slight progress. As a matter of fact, the cold water had already commenced to cramp their bodies, and the weight of their clothes dragged them down so that their feeble efforts were no more than keeping their chins above water.

How long he struggled with the waves Joe had no idea. Queer pictures and fancies kept shooting through his head. He heard Ted's voice once or twice, tried to answer, and then actually forgot about it. The chill was doing its work. His motions were purely mechanical, and were growing weaker and weaker. Once the water closed over his head, and the realization that he was sinking spurred him to a little flurry of effort.

Then a bright yellow eye of light suddenly opened almost straight in front of him. Joe heard a confused shout, caught a glimpse of figures and dripping oars. Something wet and heavy splashed into the water close to him. He retained just enough strength and presence of mind to close his stiffened fingers around the rope.

XVIII

THE BLUE COLOSSUS

JOE was dimly conscious of being pulled over the gunwale of a boat by the strong arms of half a dozen men, of slipping down into the bottom of the boat, where somebody covered him with a blanket. He saw a limp, dripping object that he knew was Ted pulled in over the other side of the boat.

Then came a long, hard pull across the waves into the darkness, during which he could see the figures of the rowers, mere darker blotches against the dark sky, bending back and forth as they pulled the long blades.

Strangely enough—and due in all probability to his weakened condition—he was afraid, not of any vague thing, but that the boat would never reach the ship toward which it was pulling. He shrank in abject terror before the same waves which he had faced unflinchingly all through the night in the launch.

He was hardly more than partially conscious when the dim bulk of a vessel loomed before them. The boat was picked up with some difficulty, and

THE BLUE COLOSSUS

Ted and Joe were bundled out onto the deck rather roughly. There were a few muttered words in the Blue tongue, and they were hurried across a dark deck, down an unlighted hatchway, along a passage, and into a bare cubby-hole of a room dimly illuminated by a single incandescent light of low candle-power.

Before they had time to see his face, the man who accompanied them fairly pushed them into the room, flung after them a bundle of dry clothing, and went out, bolting the door behind them.

The exertion of crossing the deck and descending the ladder had roused Joe somewhat, and he realized that they must get out of their soaked clothing without loss of time. He bent over Ted's prostrate figure and shook him out of his stupor.

"We've got to get our clothes off, Ted," he mumbled; "got to get 'em off in a hurry. They've given us dry ones."

Like men in a dream they got off their clothes with fumbling fingers, and pulled on the rough woolen uniforms which had been flung to them. The room must have been close to the furnaces, Joe thought, because it was gratefully warm. This was his last conscious thought, for the exertion of changing their clothes was all that the two of them could do. They dropped down onto the floor of the room and into the sleep of utter exhaustion.

It was impossible for them to tell, when they awoke, how long they had slept. The tiny light

CLEARING THE SEAS

still burned steadily in the low ceiling above their heads. The only difference in the appearance of the room was that a tray of food stood on the floor inside the door, and the two boys fell on it ravenously and ate silently until the last morsel had vanished.

Speech came to them slowly. They had passed through experiences during the past few hours which would have crushed less sturdy bodies, they had been rescued from almost certain death in a fashion that was nothing short of miraculous, and so strange had it all been that they could hardly believe themselves awake, and the whole queer series of events which had passed since they crawled out of their tent in the prison-pen of the Blues anything but a wild and disordered dream.

They had no idea of their whereabouts, of the men who had pulled them out of the water, or of the vessel on which they were confined. Ted had been as far as Joe from complete possession of his faculties, and remembered no more of their rescue.

"These people seem to be a different sort," Ted said. "The way they bundled us in here wasn't much like the way they took us off the *Alaska*."

Both of them were too stiff and wretched to care to speculate on anything. The fact that they were alive was enough. They spent hours drowsing on the floor, talking in jerky, half-

THE BLUE COLOSSUS

finished sentences, and wondering when they were to be fed again. It was not until they had enjoyed a second meal (thrust into their room when both of them were asleep) that they were really thoroughly awake.

"Do you know," Joe said, suddenly, "that this boat is going faster than any ship you and I have ever been on?"

Ted nodded, his mouth too full for speech.

"I've been listening to those engines for the last half-hour," Joe went on. "Turbines, I'd call them, and running top speed all the time. If we aren't making better than forty knots I miss my guess."

"They haven't anything but torpedo-craft that would make such speed," Ted replied, "and why would any torpedo-boat be tearing through the water without running-lights and with no other ships in sight?"

"I don't know just why," Joe said; "but I'm sure that it's for some reason we haven't guessed. That's the whole plan of the Blues, Ted, doing the things that we're least expecting and least prepared for. They struck the fleet on the heels of the storm. We don't know how much damage they did. They got the *Alaska*, and they probably did more. Then they hit the coast of Maine, which was about the last place an invading army might be expected to strike. We thought their army had just shut itself off, only to find that they had those aerial transports, and could strike about

CLEARING THE SEAS

where they pleased. And now here's a Blue ship slipping through the night and tearing along the coast at a great rate of speed, alone and with no lights showing. We can be sure that they're trying to strike a sudden blow—and we know that they strike mighty hard when they hit!"

Ted nodded thoughtfully. "I guess you're right," he admitted; then, with a quick change of tone, "If we have to stay on board and see them succeed, I'll wish they'd never heard our hail and that we'd gone down with the launch."

Before Joe had time to speak the door of the little room was flung open and two figures loomed in the narrow doorway. One was that of a man dressed in the tattered uniform of an American marine, the other was that of a Blue officer.

So striking was this latter figure that Joe and Ted fixed their eyes on him without giving the wretched-looking marine another glance.

The Blue officer was an enormous man, standing at least six feet and a half high, and with a pair of shoulders which fairly blocked the doorway. But more than his mere bulk made the two Americans forget any other presence. The man's face, clean-shaven in contrast to most of the Blue officers, looked as though it might have been cut from granite. The features were heavy and deeply lined, and the skin itself was of a peculiar gray shade. But most remarkable of all were the eyes, deep-set, unwavering, and piercing.

THE BLUE COLOSSUS

The man looked exactly what he was—a powerful, desperate man selected for a bold stroke!

For a few seconds he stood motionless in the doorway, then pointed a huge forefinger at Ted.

“Come!” he commanded; and Ted went without a word.

XIX

THE ORDEAL

WHEN the door had closed Joe and the strange marine stared at each other, then the latter sat down on the floor and covered his face with his hands. When he looked up his face was drawn and haggard.

"Can your partner keep a tight grip on his tongue?" he asked.

"I guess he can," answered Joe.

"God knows he'll need to!" cried the marine. "The only reason that beast didn't get it out of me was because I didn't know. And I cried like a baby trying to make him believe I didn't know!"

"What did he do to you?" Joe asked.

The marine jumped to his feet and beat his hands together in impotent rage. "Looked at me!" he cried. "Just looked at me and laughed! That sounds silly—but you wait!"

Joe saw that the man's spirit was thoroughly broken, and hesitated to question him, although he was fairly tingling with eagerness to learn how an American marine came to be on board one of the Blue ships. After a few minutes the

THE ORDEAL

marine got control of himself and poured out his story without being questioned.

Three days before he had been on duty on board the revenue cutter *Consul*, which had been turned into a supply-ship, and had been making a run with a cargo of uniforms.

"Of course it was taking a chance," he admitted; "but in these few days we've learned that we can't do anything but take chances!"

Not more than two hundred and fifty miles from Cape Cod, just as darkness was settling down, a long, low, terribly fast torpedo-boat destroyer had come rushing down on them out of the dusk. The young officer commanding the *Consul*, forgetting discretion in the pride of his first command, had first attempted flight, then, finding that he stood no more chance of escaping the destroyer than a turtle would of outstripping a greyhound, he turned and fought.

"Crazy, the youngster was!" wailed the marine; "stark mad because the Blues were after the first little tub of a ship he'd ever commanded. Maybe he thought because she was a destroyer she didn't carry many guns—and us with half a dozen 6-pounders and one 3-inch! Well, she carried guns enough! They blew the old *Consul* to bits in something like ten minutes. Fifty-seven of us there were on board, and they picked up three! The last thing I remember was hearing the boiler go and seeing the pieces of it come up through the deck like clowns in a trick-show!"

CLEARING THE SEAS

He stopped again, and Joe waited a minute before he asked, "And the Blues picked you up?"

"Oh yes," the marine said, dully, "they picked us up—three of us. Poor Becker died while they were hauling him into the boat, and Bradley, the *Consul's* boatswain, died yesterday. Scalded, he was. I don't know why nothing hit me—I wish it had! Two days now that Blue giant's been at me. He won't let me alone. Takes me into that cabin with him, sits down and asks me the same questions over and over again. That's all he does, just sits still and asks questions. I wish to God I knew the answer he wants. I'd tell him quick enough if he'd let me off."

"What questions does he ask?" demanded Joe.

The marine looked up as though he was startled. "Why, about the Canal, of course," he answered.

"The Canal!"

The marine nodded and stared at him, making no offer to explain.

"You'll have to tell me the whole thing," Joe said. "We've been as good as dead men for a month as far as news was concerned."

"Well, you ought to guess at something!" complained the marine in his thin, querulous voice. "What they're trying to do is block the Atlantic end of the Panama Canal so our ships from the Pacific side can't get through!"

Joe's jaw dropped. The explanation was so simple that he wondered it had not entered his

THE ORDEAL

head before. He had had all the facts in his possession; he had simply failed to put them together. He had known during the days on the southern drill-grounds that fully half the strength of the American navy was on the western coast of the continent. If the Blues could block the Atlantic end of the Canal, it meant that the American vessels of the Pacific Fleet would have to follow the same course the *Oregon* had made famous when she made her record run during the Spanish-American War of 1898.

It had taken the *Oregon* nearly six weeks to run the 14,333 miles from San Francisco to Santiago de Cuba. The ships of the present day were faster, but they would have a somewhat longer run to make.

If the Blues could carry out their intention, it meant that for more than a month their ships would have to face less than half the true strength of the American navy.

"But see here—" began Joe, when the door of the room opened a second time, and Ted came in, while the figure of the gigantic officer showed in the passage behind him.

Joe had time for a quick glance at Ted's face. He was inclined to believe that the worn-out marine had greatly exaggerated the almost hypnotic power of the Blue officer; but Ted's white face made him change his mind.

The Blue officer merely nodded from outside the door, and Joe got to his feet and stumbled

CLEARING THE SEAS

out of the room. He followed the great figure down the narrow steel-walled passage and through another doorway. He found himself in a small but well-furnished cabin. The Blue officer sat down before a desk with his back to Joe and commenced to write. Joe stood perfectly still, glancing casually at the furnishings of the cabin and listening to the throb of the great engines.

"Have you been in the Canal Zone?"

The question was snapped at Joe with bullet-like swiftness, and in a hard, metallic voice that seemed to cut like a knife. Joe hesitated an instant to get a grip on himself before he answered. The expression of Ted's face had told him that Ted had not told, and he knew he could hold his tongue.

"Yes, I have," he answered.

"When?"

"Last winter."

"How long were you there?"

"Two weeks."

"Do you know anything about engineering or fortifications?"

"Very little."

"How long have you been in the navy?"

"A little more than a year."

Surely, Joe thought, there was nothing very alarming about questions of this sort! It was true that it was rather unpleasant to be questioned by a man's back, and that there was something about the giant's voice which made him uncom-

THE ORDEAL

fortable, but if it got no worse than this he had nothing to fear.

With a quickness that was astonishing in a man of his size, the Blue got out of his chair, crossed the few feet of floor space between them in a single stride, and seized Joe's shoulder in a grip like that of a pair of pipe-tongs. Those queer, piercing eyes were within a yard of Joe's face, boring into his own eyes like two Blue gimlets.

"Tell me all you know about those Canal Zone forts!" commanded the Blue.

Joe knew that his captor had no right to lay hands upon him. He threw up his arms and tried to shake off the great hand that had closed upon his shoulder. He might as well have tried to claw open the closed breech-lock of a 14-inch gun with his finger-nails.

"Answer me!" came the knife-like voice.

Fairly writhing under the pain in his shoulder—whose bones seemed fairly crunching under the other's grip—Joe set his teeth and shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

For a long minute the Blue held him, then dropped his huge hand and turned back to his desk. For five minutes he wrote steadily, then, without turning or checking the motion of his pen, he repeated his command in exactly the same tone of voice he had used:

"Tell me all that you know about those Canal Zone forts!"

Joe did not speak. He expected the Blue to

CLEARING THE SEAS

turn and crush his shoulder again, but the figure at the desk did not move. The pen continued to scratch steadily. Perhaps two minutes passed, and Joe was a trifle off his guard when the same question was snapped at him a third time.

For more than half an hour this strange form of torture continued. The Blue did not cease writing, did not turn his head, did not alter the tones of his voice. Sometimes the intervals between the repetitions of the question were several minutes long, again they were not more than a few seconds.

Exhausted as he was by the terrible experiences through which he had passed, and placed now under the double strain of standing erect and having the hard voice incessantly battering away at his ears, Joe felt that not only his physical strength but his will-power was breaking under the ordeal.

He remembered stories that he had read of the terrible "third degree" practised by the police to force confessions from prisoners.

"I've got to hang on!" he kept saying to himself. "I've got to hang on!"

For Joe did not, like the wretched marine, have the defense of ignorance. In the two weeks that he had spent in the Canal Zone he had seen a great deal of the fortifications and the various defenses. Once the guard slipped from his tongue and his lips refused to obey his will, he was ca-

THE ORDEAL

pable of telling things that the man before him would give a great deal to know.

But just as he was nerving himself for the next attack the Blue rose from his desk and, without a word, led him back to the unused store-room where Ted and the marine were confined.

XX

GUESSING AT THE TRUTH

FOR a few minutes nobody spoke. Joe lay flat on his back, his eyes closed, that hateful sentence ringing through his brain. Ted got up and crossed the room to Joe's side.

"Stop thinking about it!" he ordered. "I did it, too; but we mustn't! We've got to be ready for him and not let go. Think about anything else, talk about anything else, get your mind off what you've just been through!"

It was sound advice, and Joe knew it. He sat up, and the two boys forced themselves to talk of anything under the sun. The marine listened stupidly for a little while, then rolled over on the floor and went to sleep.

"As long as they keep us together," Joe said, "we'll be all right. If I didn't have some one to talk to I don't know whether I could hold out or not."

"Same here!" confessed Ted, then jerked his head toward the figure on the floor beside them. "And that makes me wonder why they put him in with us."

GUESSING AT THE TRUTH

Joe mused over this problem in silence for a minute. "Just for effect," he decided. "They can't get anything out of the poor chap; but they've scared him almost crazy, and they thought putting him in here and letting him talk would weaken us."

All through the never-ending day the ordeal continued. Now Joe, now Ted, now the marine, would be summoned to the door, led through the passage and into the little cabin, and there the monotonous sentence would be hurled at them until their senses fairly staggered. No violence whatever was offered them, and they were fed generously and at regular intervals.

"What made poor Jenks go under," Ted said once, after the unfortunate marine had come back weeping like a girl, "was the fear of something worse than what he had gone through. He was just scared. We've kept our heads, and I know we've been through the worst of it. These people aren't savages. They'll go as far as they can, but they'll make war as civilized people make it. There won't be any torture or anything of that sort. They wouldn't have given us anything to eat if that were the kind of game they played!"

When no summons came to the cell-like room for more than an hour, the boys had a hard time making themselves believe that the ordeal was actually over, but once they made up their minds that it actually *was* over, they looked at each other with an expression which said plainer than words:

CLEARING THE SEAS

"What next?"

Then, for the first time since they had come aboard, the great engines dropped from their steady rhythm, ran more slowly, then stopped altogether. For an hour the ship lay motionless, then the steady throb and the faint vibration of the entire hull recommenced.

For three days and nights the Blue destroyer tore its way through the water. If the Canal Zone was its goal, the two American sailors knew that a straight run of some 2,300 miles lay ahead of it.

Their isolation was complete. Even the companionship of Jenks was denied them, for the marine gave out completely and was taken from the room—probably to the sick-bay of the vessel. During the three days Ted and Joe saw no one except the silent, glum-looking man who brought them their food. They received no more visits from the huge Blue officer, nor could they gain the slightest idea of what went on aboard the destroyer.

Piecing together the fragments of information that Jenks had given them, and adding to this their speculations as to the probable situation, they tried to guess at the plan which had sent the vessel which bore them hurrying southward.

It was possible, of course, that Panama was not the destroyer's objective.

"She can't carry many guns," Ted said. "A boat that would need ten minutes to blow an old

GUESSING AT THE TRUTH

revenue cutter to bits doesn't amount to much for offensive strength. And why they should be rushing one torpedo-boat to the Canal is beyond me."

"Their fleet along the Atlantic coast must outnumber ours now," added Joe. "You'd think they would slam the whole force down there in a hurry—because blocking the Canal, or at least attempting to block it, is a move they can't neglect."

"On the face of it this looks like a poor move," agreed Ted. "But as you said the other day, the Blues don't make that sort of moves. They're figuring on outguessing us again."

Joe shook his head. He had some inkling of the strength of the forts which guarded the Atlantic entrance, and the idea of attacking them with a single vessel certainly seemed sheer madness.

"I don't believe they're heading for the Canal at all!" he decided, at last.

Toward evening of the fifth day which had passed since their rescue from the sinking launch, the man who brought their food swung open their door and summoned them gruffly to appear on deck. They followed him eagerly enough, five days of close confinement coming on the heels of the northern prison-pen being about all they could stand.

As on the night they had first seen it, the deck was in utter darkness. For a few minutes they could make out nothing—except that the ship

CLEARING THE SEAS

was rushing through the water at a rate of speed which agreed with their estimates. After a time they could make out some details—the ship's rails, the funnels, a single mast forward, the boats hanging from the davits, and the shadowy outlines of a few light guns. Ted nudged Joe and pointed to the huge figure of the officer leaning against the port rail.

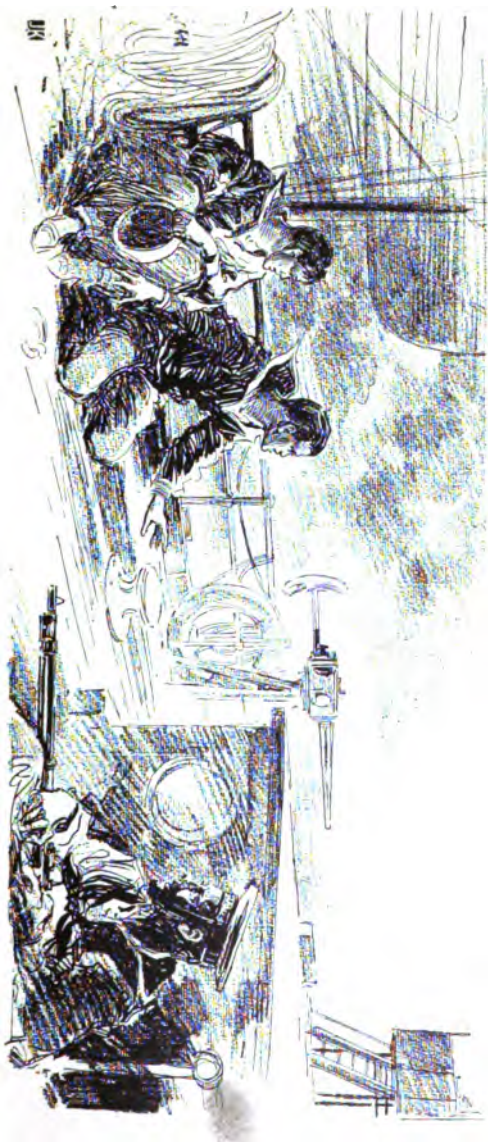
The man who had brought them on deck led them to a sheltered position near the stern, ordered them to sit down, and squatted on the deck opposite them. They could see that he had a rifle across his knees.

"It is possible," the Blue announced in the familiar slow, careful English, "that this ship will be destroyed to-night. You have been brought on deck that you may have a chance to escape. If the danger is great enough, I shall tell you that you are free to save yourselves. Until then I shall shoot either of you who tries to get to his feet. It is not a good light, but I can see well enough!"

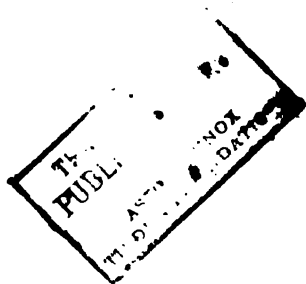
He relapsed into silence and sat motionless. Although the boys could not see them, they knew that his eyes never left them.

The destroyer continued to tear through the water at the same furious speed. There was no rush of preparation, no sounds whatever except the beat of the engines and the rush of the water.

Presently Joe reached out cautiously and touched Ted's leg. Straight in front of them a



STRAIGHT IN FRONT OF THEM A FAINT, GREENISH-WHITE GLOW APPEARED ON THE HORIZON



GUESSING AT THE TRUTH

faint, greenish-white glow appeared on the horizon. Both of them had seen that glow in the sky before, and there could be no mistake.

The Blue destroyer, cutting through the water at a rate of nearly fifty miles an hour, was heading straight for the Colon end of the Great Canal!

XXI

THE CANAL

ONCE Ted leaned forward and started to say something, but their guard reached over and prodded him in the breast with the muzzle of his rifle, shaking his head as he did so, and Joe and Ted made on further efforts to talk.

The Blue destroyer, dark from stem to stern, was now running at reduced speed, and slipping through the water like a ghost. Although her speed was still considerable, the engines had been throttled down in such fashion that the sound of them was only faintly audible on deck, and could not have been heard at all a few yards away from the ship.

Ever since coming on deck, Joe had puzzled his brain trying to imagine in what manner the Blue ship was going to attack. One vessel, unless it carried some tremendous engine of destruction hitherto unheard of, could not hope to attack the defenses of the Canal with any chances of success. The most powerful dreadnought in the Blue navy could not have accomplished it; then why should

THE CANAL

the Blues—who never did anything rash—make the attempt with a mere destroyer?

While Joe was by no means familiar with all the details of the defenses, he knew in a rough way what they were. There were, to begin with, both fixed and contact mines, the former electrically fired from the shore, the others so devised that they would explode when struck by a ship or other floating body. Besides this, there were batteries containing some of the most powerful guns in the world, and the systems of range-finding and fire-control were so perfect that a perfect hail of enormous shells could be poured into any part of the sea within several miles of the Canal entrance. And finally—unless the series of naval encounters which had followed the great storm had fairly wiped out the Atlantic Fleet—there was a powerful squadron of war-ships with which an attacking force would have to reckon.

That one little ship—whose heaviest gun would have no more effect on the fortifications than a boy's pea-shooter—should make this attack seemed like the plan of a madman. Yet Joe's experiences had shown him that the Blues indulged in no mad ventures. Somewhere behind this seeming folly lay a carefully worked-out plan, and Joe had to admit that the huge commander of the vessel seemed a man who would carry his orders to completion if it was humanly possible to do so.

One by one Joe considered the possibilities. It might be that the Blues knew the location of the

CLEARING THE SEAS

contact mines, and that the pilot of the destroyer could avoid them. This eliminated a single obstacle, and that the least of them. There remained the fixed mines, the fortifications, and the ships.

"And it's possible," Joe said to himself, "that there aren't any ships, or at least no great number of them. That leaves the fixed mines and the fortifications, at any rate. And no ship could hope to get past them unless every man on shore was dead or looking the other way."

An instant later Joe gave such a startled jump that both Ted and the watchful guard looked at him in surprise. Joe's own unspoken words had, he believed, given him the key to the Blue plan.

"That's just what is going to happen!" he thought. "The men on shore *will* be looking the other way. This is only a part of the whole attack, and they think it will succeed because the attention of the defenders will be occupied in trying to beat off some other attack."

But this question only gave rise to others. What sort of an attack would it be that would so occupy the land forces as to give the destroyer time and chance to slip past the breakwaters and the outer forts into the Bay of Manzanillo? Joe had to give it up.

Meanwhile, the Blue ship had been plowing steadily forward. The lights were no longer a mere greenish blur on the far horizon, but had become distinct. And still there had been no

THE CANAL

sign of an American man-of-war! The destroyer must already be well within the range of one of the great 16-inch guns, a single shell from which would sink it.

Suddenly the tropical stillness was split by the report of a gun. An instant later there was a perfect storm of firing. Joe sat tense, expecting every second to hear the rush and scream of passing projectiles, or the splash of poorly aimed shots falling short—yet there was not a sound, although the firing in the direction of the Isthmus increased in volume.

Joe had guessed correctly. The shore batteries were not firing at the Blue ship, but at some other foe, invisible to those on board the destroyer, and, with the perfect harmony characteristic of the Blue manoeuvres, the twofold attack had been perfectly timed.

The instant the firing began the Blue craft seemed to fairly leap out of the water. The great engines, with silence no longer necessary, fairly roared, the ship trembled from end to end and tore through the water at such a rate that the spray from her sharp prow came surging up onto the deck.

Events began happening with a dizzy speed that fairly took the breath of the two Americans watching the spectacle from the forecastle of the destroyer. With a roar like that of a dozen great guns fired at once, a mine exploded on the port side of the ship. A huge column of water, visible

CLEARING THE SEAS

even in the darkness, shot up hundreds of feet into the air so close to the ship that those on deck were drenched. The destroyer heeled over to starboard, but righted herself without losing headway.

One after another, no fewer than six mines were exploded in quick succession, and one of them crashed out of the water so close to the destroyer that there was a quick scurry of feet across the deck of the vessel, and an exchange of hoarse calls and answers between the officers. But either luck or absolute knowledge of the whereabouts of the mines—or, more likely, a combination of the two—carried the destroyer through.

Then came the terrific thunders of the great guns secure in their pits on shore. Given a fair chance, the gunners in those batteries would have sunk the destroyer without wasting a shot. But they had no fair chance. Their target was rushing at them through the night at a speed that would have called for good marksmanship under the best of conditions, and, to make matters worse, they had to shoot blindly. The destroyer did not show so much as a glimmer of light, yet was too far distant for the eagerly hunting search-lights, whose white beams were sweeping across the waters to pick her up. Thus far the explosions of the mines were the only things which could give the American gunners much idea of the whereabouts of the hostile ship.

Again the "Blue luck," which was becoming

THE CANAL

proverbial, held. Some of the great shells screamed close, but the fleet vessel scudded across an area of water which had been deemed impossible to cross, and was not struck a single time!

Joe caught a glimpse of a dim bulk of land ahead, the shadowy mass of the great West Breakwater, with guns flashing behind it and the twinkling lights of Colon across the outer bay.

"They're going to get in!" he groaned. "They're going to get in!"

Then, guns flashing and search-lights ablaze, came the American ships. Not until later did Joe learn why there were so few of them, why they were such feeble vessels, and why, above all things, they were actually inside the breakwater instead of out in the open sea, where their mere presence would have made the attack of the destroyer impossible.

Joe's heart leaped and thrilled at the sight of them. Not since the last awful minutes on board the doomed *Alaska* had he seen the flash of a gun fired by his countrymen, and, without his being actually aware of it, the long weeks of captivity, cut off from all communication, had made him feel that the Blues were doing all the fighting. The sight of the American vessels bearing down on the madly rushing destroyer made him forget every other consideration, and he leaped to his feet, cheering madly.

"Come on!" he shouted, wildly. "Come on!"

The guard leaped at him, growling out orders,

CLEARING THE SEAS

but Joe was past caring for such trifles as a loaded rifle pointed at his head. With a sweep of his arm he brushed the weapon aside, conscious that Ted too had leaped to his feet and seized the guard from behind.

Holding the struggling Blue between them, the two boys literally fought their way to the rail, their whole beings absorbed in the marvelous race against destruction they were watching, utterly forgetful that the screaming shells from the American ships endangered their lives as well as those of their captors.

There was no time now for the other members of the crew to come to the aid of the man who had been overpowered by Joe and Ted. A blaring bugle was sounding amidships, and those of the crew who had been standing about the deck were hurrying to their posts.

Between the destroyer and the great Gatun Locks stretched the waters of Limon Bay, five miles wide, its shores lined with batteries. Traveling at the great speed of which she was capable, the destroyer would be able to cross the five-mile stretch of water in from six to eight minutes. The question was—could she accomplish this before the shells from the American vessels had shattered her frail hull?

There were six of the American ships—light-draught cruisers, gunboats, and torpedo-craft. In point of speed they were snails compared to the destroyer, but they carried guns capable of stop-

THE CANAL

ping her wild career. It was a case of sheer speed matched against straight shooting.

From the deck of the destroyer, holding the writhing, twisting Blue sailor between them, the two Americans watched the struggle which might actually decide the entire subsequent course of the war.

For the real object of the Blues was now perfectly clear. Much as Hobson sank the *Merrimac* in the entrance to the harbor of Santiago during the Spanish-American War, they planned to sink the destroyer so close to the great locks that the passage of the Canal would be blocked for a considerable time—if not for the entire war.

No sooner had the destroyer passed the breakwaters than the fire of the American ships began to tell. There was no thick belt of protective armor to check their flight. Shooting at the flying vessel was like shooting at the side of a house.

Shell after shell struck the hull or superstructure and tore its way through. Before the destroyer had gone a mile she had been pierced in a dozen places, and her deck was littered with wreckage—yet the powerful engines still beat, and standing on the forecastle, clearly outlined in the glare of the search-lights, loomed the gigantic figure of the great Blue officer who would not give up.

Foot after foot, yard after yard, the destroyer plowed on her way toward the goal that was now so close. The American ships, aware that they could not hope to overtake the fleeing Blue or

CLEARING THE SEAS

get between her and the object of her attack, had swung broadside on so that they could bring the greatest possible number of guns into play.

Joe and Ted had one miraculous escape after another. A shell cut off the flagpole at the vessel's bow within a few yards of their heads; a second plowed a great furrow across the deck a few feet behind them, a third burst in the vessel's interior and tore open a great hole in the deck, as though it had been shivered from beneath by a blow from a great ax.

Joe, Ted, and the Blue were all hurled to the deck by the force of the explosion, and only their sudden overthrow saved them from a 6-inch shell which struck the conning-tower of the destroyer and raked the upper part of the ship from end to end.

The Blue scrambled to his feet and made off without paying any attention to the two captives. Ted and Joe crawled to the edge of the deck and crouched in the feeble shelter of the broken rail.

In breathless silence they watched the unequal duel—which yet seemed about to be decided in favor of the weaker side. Mauled and battered though she was, the destroyer had as yet received no mortal wound, and the distance between her prow and the locks had been reduced to little more than a mile.

Then, just as it seemed as though the wild rush would succeed in spite of the terrible odds against it, the destroyer's prow swung sharply to port.

THE CANAL

Her speed continued unchecked, but her steering-gear had been smashed and she would no longer answer her helm.

There followed a few moments of wild disorder. The boys caught glimpses of the Blue officer raging about the deck like a giant gone mad, bellowing down the speaking-tubes, shaking his fists at the bellowing guns of the American ships, fairly splintering the boards of the deck with the blows of his huge feet.

Frantically the Blues tried to bring the destroyer back upon her course. Men were shot down as they struggled with the crippled wheel or while they hurried below-decks to bring the auxiliary gear into play.

For perhaps three hundred yards, staggering like a drunken man, the destroyer charged through the water almost at right angles to her former course. Then, with a shock that threw every man on board violently to the deck, and which almost wrenched the vessel in two, she buried her prow in a sand-bar and stopped.

She had ended her wonderful rush so close to the precious locks that they were clearly visible from her ruined decks in the glare of the search-lights.

XXII

A BREATHING-SPACE

JOE LAWTON and Ted Brandt sat in the center of a group of sailors on the berth-deck of the *Macon*, a light-draught gunboat which formed part of the Canal's fleet of defenders. They had been rescued from the Blue destroyer with some of her crew a few minutes before her forward magazine blew up, and, in spite of their fatigued condition, had spent the remainder of the night answering the questions of a sober-faced circle of American officers.

And now, after the long weeks during which they had heard nothing, they were learning, as fast as the boatswain's mate of the *Macon* could talk, the course the war had taken during their captivity.

"You fellows on board the *Alaska* didn't get out of the storm any easier than most of the other ships," he told them. "There hasn't been such a storm along the coast for years, and no fleet in the world could have faced it and kept together."

"Then the Blue fleet escaped the storm?" Ted asked, eagerly.

A BREATHING-SPACE

"Of course they did," answered the other. "No man knows where they were when it began, but it's as certain as day that they hit no more than the edge of it. As you probably guessed, the *Alaska's* great fight was only one of several. They didn't all take place on the same day. While you were fighting, the *Porto Rico* was engaged with three Blue battle-ships of the first class. Two of the Blue ships were sunk, and the third was captured; but the *Porto Rico* was in such bad shape that she had to leave her prize and limp into Boston harbor. She's there yet, pretty much of a wreck and of no further use for the war. The next day the *Minnesota*, *North Dakota*, and *Texas*, which had managed to get together, fought more than double their number of Blue ships almost within sight of New York harbor. They say they could hear the guns on Broadway. No ships were sunk on either side, and all three of ours got into the Brooklyn Navy-yard in pretty hard shape. They'll be in commission again in two weeks' time. The other five battle-ships made one port or another without much trouble. Of course, the storm raked all of 'em pretty clean, and the *Delaware* made Charleston harbor after a running fight with three of those one-gun cruisers that lasted eighty hours."

"One-gun cruisers!" exclaimed Joe. "What in the world are those?"

"Haven't you seen any?" asked the boatswain's mate in surprise.

CLEARING THE SEAS

Both Ted and Joe shook their heads.

"These Blues," the other went on, "seem to have tried every crazy trick in the world—and made good with it. They've built at least half a dozen of these freak cruisers. Small ships pretty heavily armored and mighty speedy, with just one big gun mounted forward. Nobody's had a close look at 'em, and they were built and launched secretly. And nobody knows how big those single guns are. But they commenced shooting at the *Delaware* before she could do any effective work with her fourteens—and that means that they sure are some big guns!"

The man paused, took out of his mouth the short pipe he had been smoking, stared at it thoughtfully, and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"That accounts for the battle-ships," he resumed; "and I sure hate to tell you boys about the cruisers!"

"They're not lost!" cried Joe.

The boatswain's mate nodded, and the other sailors growled under their breath. "That's just what they are—lost, every one of the four!"

Even though they had expected to hear something of this kind, the knowledge came to Ted and Joe with a shock. It was hard to realize that four American ships—ships that the boys had seen every day for weeks on the training-grounds—had gone to the bottom, and that the splendid fellows that made up their crews had gone with them.

A BREATHING-SPACE

"They never should have built those cruisers—never," the veteran went on, emphasizing his words with thuds of his big fist. "They cost as much as a battle-ship, couldn't go much faster, and didn't have half the fighting power. And we built ten of 'em! Five Blue battle-ships came down on 'em off the Massachusetts coast somewhere. They didn't have a chance. They made a fight of it; they tried to use speed when they couldn't throw the metal. But the Blue ships were just as fast. I don't like to talk about it. I served two years on the *California* myself!"

"And what about the fighting on land?" Ted asked.

The boatswain's mate threw up his hands. "I guess you two know as much about it as anybody else," he said. "You saw the Blue balloons. They've cut the country into bits. They're here one day and there the next. I don't know that they've actually gained much ground, but they've scared the country stiff—and that's worth about as much in a short war such as this. They've landed two armies, one in Texas and the one that you saw. But for that storm they'd never have got a single soldier ashore. Now that they're there we've got our hands full."

Later Joe learned from a gunner in one of the land batteries the explanations of the strange night attack on the Canal, and the reasons why the Blue destroyer had come so near fulfilling its mission.

A small but efficient land force, consisting of

CLEARING THE SEAS

infantry and artillery, had been landed in Costa Rica, doubtless from one of the great aerial transports, and deliberately marched a few miles through neutral territory and into the Canal Zone.

At the same time, partly by a naval demonstration, and partly by wireless messages sent out in what appeared to be the American code, and picked up by the naval station at Colon, the greater part of the American ships patrolling the waters at the Atlantic end of the Canal had been lured away.

As on previous occasions, the different parts of the Blue plan had fitted together like the sections of a jig-saw puzzle. The decoying of the American ships, the sudden attack of the land force, and the rush of the destroyer had been perfectly timed, and the American officers were not slow to admit that had the Gatun locks been injured or blocked by the wrecking of the destroyer, the Blues might have gained more than they had by the sinking of the four cruisers.

XXIII

BACK HOME!

DESPITE their anxiety to reach the United States and resume an active part in the war, Joe and Ted would have been glad of a few days at Panama in which to draw their breath. But a nation at war cannot take into account the fact that the men of its army and navy may be nearly "dead beat" and greatly in need of a rest. As long as a man is well enough to take the field he must serve, and the experiences which the two boys had been through did not entitle them to anything like a vacation.

They were ordered to report at once at the League Island Navy-yard in Philadelphia. Instead of making the journey by sea—a rather hazardous matter with twice as many Blue ships as American in Atlantic waters—they crossed to Florida in a government tender and made the rest of the journey north by rail.

Of the progress of the war on land they knew only that there were two Blue armies on American soil, and that the engagements which had taken place had been victories for the Blues. What

CLEARING THE SEAS

they had not realized was the vast extent of their own country. In spite of the fact that they were no longer boys, and that the experiences and training they had been through had taught them a great deal more of warfare than most men learn in a lifetime, they unconsciously expected to see signs of military activity from the car windows.

But the country through which they passed looked exactly as it might have looked the summer before, when there was no thought of war. Men were at work in the fields, trains were running on schedule, and the appearance of the country was perfectly normal.

Of course, their uniforms attracted attention, and they were besieged with questions by their fellow-passengers. In self-defense they had to say very little, and they were greatly relieved when a white-haired man who was occupying the drawing-room of one of the Pullmans invited them to share his quarters during the long day's ride.

"Oh yes," he said, in answer to Joe's remark on the appearance of the country, "it looks all peaceful enough here, but it's a different sight in Texas—and in the North as well, I imagine, although I've seen nothing of that part of it. The Blues have overrun Texas like an army of ants. But we'll have to admit that they're the most ideal invaders that could be imagined. They're not devastating the country as our own armies did during the Civil War, nor as they did in Na-

BACK HOME!

pooleon's time. They can feed and supply their armies from their own bases. That's what makes them such splendid fighting-machines. They've solved the question of transportation. And it's you men of the navy that have the burden of the war on your shoulders. Break up these great bases of supplies they've established and you'll end the war. They can't overrun the whole country; it's too big for them. Isolate their armies and the war's as good as done."

Nothing of any moment occurred to break the monotony of the long trip north. At some points they saw troops moving toward the great concentration camps where the American forces were being gathered, at others huge piles of military supplies of all descriptions.

Along the actual seaboard the state of affairs was a little different. Here the war had come closer to the people themselves. They had seen the battered American war-ships come limping into port after the double struggle with the storm and the Blue fleet. They knew that only chance had sent the invaders to Maine and Texas instead of to other unprotected stretches of coast, and that they were in hourly danger of having another Blue landing force descend upon them. A good many people had actually left their homes and traveled inland, and business was far more seriously affected than in the interior of the country.

Upon their arrival in Philadelphia Ted and Joe hurried at once to the navy-yard and reported.

CLEARING THE SEAS

They were immediately assigned to duty on board the *Minnesota*, which was nearly ready to put to sea again.

For some days their duties were more like those of the first days in the navy than anything they had experienced for months. While the major repairs on the battle-ships had been completed, there was a vast amount of cleaning, painting, and general putting-to-rights still to be done, and the crews of the ships were occupied with these things from morning until night.

"You know, Joe," Ted confessed, as they stretched out in their hammocks one night, "knowing just what you're going to do from one hour to the next is a positive relief."

"It certainly is," agreed Joe. "We've had enough wild uncertainty to last us the rest of our lives."

But this return to the more commonplace labor of painting and scrubbing was not destined to last long—for Joe at least—and the close companionship of the pair, which had continued from the day of their enlistment, was to be broken.

About a week after they reached Philadelphia (a week which had seemed to bring no change whatever in the general situation of the war) Joe received orders to report at once for duty on board Submarine "X."

The instant he received the order a strange feeling of hesitation passed over him. He had never so much as been on board one of the sub-

BACK HOME!

marines, and had always thanked his stars that his duty had not taken him in that direction. Fighting cooped up inside the steel walls of a 14-inch turret was bad enough, but fighting blindly in the black depths of the sea, with millions of tons of water pressing down on the frail, fishlike craft that carried you, was infinitely worse.

"What in the world is Submarine 'X'?" he asked Ted.

"Haven't the slightest idea," Ted answered. "I didn't know the letters of the submarines went that high."

One of the *Minnesota's* crew explained. "It's a brand-new under-water boat that's never been tested," he said. "They've been working on it at Cramps' for almost a year, with a squad of marines on duty night and day around the shed that covers it. Nobody knows anything about it—except that, judging from the size of the shed, it's the biggest submarine that's ever been built."

Joe could not shake off the feeling of depression when he said good-by to Ted that same afternoon. "I don't want to go," he admitted as they shook hands. "There may be plenty of excitement and all that in it, but I like to do my fighting where there's plenty of fresh air."

Ted made a lame effort to cheer him up. "Never mind," he said. "Probably the thing won't work at all, and you'll be back with me on the *Minnesota* inside a few days."

XXIV

SUBMARINE "X"

SUBMARINE "X" lay just off the first slip inside the gate of the great navy-yard, her partially submerged length screened from sight by the huge gray hulls of two battle-ships, her deck reached by gang-planks running from the larger ships. At the bow and stern of the craft a gasoline-tender, filled with marines and carrying a Colt automatic gun amidships, lay at anchor, while on the shore an entire company of marines was on duty.

Joe had gone on board and reported to Lieutenant Carleton, the submarine's commander, about the middle of the afternoon. Since that time he had been busy in the narrow, dungeon-like interior of the vessel, but in the few seconds while he was crossing the gang-plank he had had time for a long, searching look at as much of Submarine "X" as was visible from above.

The boat differed in several respects from the earlier craft of the type. It was much longer, and its width, in proportion to its length, much less. Instead of a single conning-tower it had

SUBMARINE "X"

two, one forward and the other aft, and there were two hinged masts which could be folded and clamped against the top of the hull when the vessel was submerged. The deck was merely a flattened surface in the center of the rounding hull, surrounded by a low rail. In the middle of the deck was the hatch leading to the interior.

During the first few hours he spent on board Joe had a chance to see a good deal of the interior. His actual duties, once the vessel was afloat, would confine him to one of the torpedo-rooms amidships, but for the present all the twenty members of "X's" crew were busily engaged in getting aboard the last of the supplies for the first voyage, and in stowing them away under the direction of Lieutenant Carleton and the other officers.

The torpedo-rooms, four in number, were placed one at the bow, one at the stern, and one on each side of the vessel. Knowing what he did of the size of a torpedo, Joe was astonished at the smallness of the rooms, for it was manifestly impossible to handle one of the bulky under-water projectiles in any of them.

From the center of the vessel aft clear to the stern, the narrow space of the hull was entirely taken up by the engines. Of these Joe could make little or nothing. They were of an utterly unfamiliar type, and he could only guess at their nature. It was certain that they must use fuel in a very compact form or that Submarine "X"

CLEARING THE SEAS

would make no long cruises, for there was not room in the vessel for storing any great amount of fuel, while, on the other hand, the new submarine was too large to be carried on the deck of a war-ship, as were some of the smaller submarines.

By nightfall the loading of Submarine "X" was finished. The crew messed in the long passage which led from one end of the boat to the other.

Joe found that most of the men were veterans of the submarine service, to whom going to sea under water instead of at the surface was no novelty, and that only two or three others like himself had been transferred from other ships.

The first meal on board was not a very cheerful affair, and contrasted sharply with the last one Joe had had on board the *Minnesota*. The men were all dog-tired from the long day of hard work, and over all of them, veterans as well as new-comers, there hung the shadow of mystery and strangeness which makes men silent. All knew that the cruise of Submarine "X" would differ from the first voyage of any other vessel that had ever been launched.

After supper Joe was taken into the torpedo-room by the petty officer whose position corresponded to that of turret captain on board a battle-ship, and given two hours' instruction in the operation of the torpedo-tube.

The mechanism of this submarine gun looked very much like the breech-mechanism of an or-

SUBMARINE "X"

dinary ship's gun, except that there were no recoil cylinders, and that the tube of the weapon was fixed on its carriage instead of being movable.

What astonished Joe was the size and nature of the torpedoes carried by the new vessel. The old-style Whithead torpedoes had been huge, cigar-shaped projectiles several feet long and weighing hundreds of pounds. The petty officer showed Joe a brass cylinder two feet long and perhaps four inches in diameter with a clockwork mechanism and a tiny propeller at one end.

"It looks dinky," he admitted in answer to Joe's look of amazement; "but it's got the punch. They won't knock the whole side out of a battle-ship the way the old Whiteheads would, but they'll crack the thickest armor-plate that any ship carries, and that's all we want. And what's more, they're much more accurate, and we can carry a hundred rounds for each tube."

Joe's first night on board was unpleasant enough. His hammock swung at the end of the line in the passage, and the man next to him was a surly, dark-faced fellow who showed no desire to talk to him.

While Joe had been having his instruction in the torpedo-room, Submarine "X" had slipped from her moorings, wriggled like an eel through the ships that surrounded her, and dived into the waters of the bay. Where she was headed, what her objective was, and at what speed she was moving toward it were things which were known

CLEARING THE SEAS

only to the officers in the glass-topped room under the conning-tower forward.

Joe lay staringly wide awake, trying to make himself realize where he was. That he was perhaps several hundred feet under the surface of the sea, that the air he was breathing was artificially pumped to him by the engines of the ship, and that these same engines were driving the "X" through the water seemed impossible. There was no sensation of motion. The long, hooded, strange-looking engines beat without a perceptible tremor. When one passed the closed door of the engine-room, behind which Joe had seen a man in white clothes watching a gauge, he heard a steady, droning hum, but that was all.

When he was aroused Joe knew that it was morning, because reveille was sounded; there was no change in the appearance of things inside the boat. The incandescent lights still burned overhead, and there was no suggestion of what the day might be like above the sea.

The day passed uneventfully enough. There was little or nothing for the crew to do, with no decks to be scrubbed, ashes to be hoisted, boats to be overhauled—or any of the thousand and one odd jobs which are usually waiting for the jackies on an ordinary man-of-war. Joe began to understand why the men of the submarine service were taciturn and seemed to be always carrying a grouch. The silence, the darkness, the seeming absence of motion, got on the nerves,

SUBMARINE "X"

Once during the course of the day Joe was called forward into the conning-tower, where Lieutenant Carleton questioned him at considerable length about the Blue war-ships he had seen after the capture of the *Alaska*, and at even greater length about the destroyer which had made the desperate attack on the Canal.

Joe answered the questions as well as he could, although his opportunities for observation on board both the Blue vessels had been limited enough, but while he talked his eyes were busy.

The conning-tower of Submarine "X" was by far the strangest-looking place in which Joe had ever found himself. It was a circular room perhaps fifteen feet in diameter and eight feet high. In the center of it a ladder ran up into the tower proper, and the helmsman stood on a little steel platform, his legs just visible from the room below.

At one side of the room was an ordinary desk, but the pigeonholes had been torn out of it, and it fairly bristled with speaking-tubes and push-buttons. One of the younger officers was seated at the desk, and under a glass in front of him a ribbon of white paper unrolled under a pen which marked it with red ink.

The walls of the room were fairly covered with dials of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and Lieutenant Carleton's eyes kept traveling from one to another of them while he talked.

Joe left the room with his feeling of mystery

CLEARING THE SEAS

and depression increased. In the passage outside the conning-tower he met Clark, a seaman who had been transferred to the "X" from one of the boats of the torpedo flotilla.

"Say," demanded Clark, as though the opportunity for speech was grateful, "how do you like this thing, anyhow?"

"I don't like it at all," admitted Joe.

Clark stretched out his hand eagerly. "Put her there!" he exclaimed. "I hate it—hate it like poison. I've gone around like a kid afraid of the dark ever since I came aboard. I'm actually afraid to put my foot down hard for fear of stepping through the bottom, and I keep looking at the walls to see if all that water on top of us hasn't commenced to break in!"

"I know how you feel," Joe answered, smiling in spite of himself at the expression on the other's face. "It's as though there was a weight pressing down on you all the time."

Clark nodded and opened his lips to speak, but even as he did so an electric bell, used on the submarine instead of a bugle, began to ring sharply.

Joe and Clark looked at each other with faces gone suddenly white. That bell was sounding the call to quarters. Submarine "X" had found what she had come after!

XXV

BENEATH THE WAVES

THREE men stood about the torpedo-tube in the port torpedo-room—Wilcox (the crew captain), Ledyard, and Joe Lawton. In response to Wilcox's order Joe swung open the pneumatic breech of the tube, and Ledyard stuffed in one of the terrible little brass cylinders. Wilcox stood with the lanyard of the firing-mechanism in his hand, the receiver of a little telephone strapped to his ear.

There were no gun-sighters and gun-pointers! All the aiming was done from the conning-tower, and Submarine "X" herself acted as sight for all four of the tubes. When the boat was in the proper position the order to fire this tube or that would be snapped to the crew captains, who, like Wilcox, stood ready, lanyard in hand.

It was something like the long wait in the handling-room of the *Alaska* before the firing of the first gun, except now there would be no clang of steel plates to break the tension, only a jerk of Wilcox's wrist and the hiss of air from the tube.

Ledyard and the crew captain seemed perfectly

CLEARING THE SEAS

calm and impassive. Wilcox leaned against the wall of the room and stared at the floor. Ledyard made invisible crosses on the breech of the tube with the end of his finger and whistled between his teeth.

Such calmness was beyond Joe's comprehension. It seemed to him that if the order to fire did not come or something happen to break the strain something inside him would burst. He could hear the hammering of his heart, and a dozen questions were chasing one another wildly through his brain.

What was it that the "X" had suddenly come upon? Were they about to attempt to destroy one of the Blue battle-ships? Had they discovered, with those sensitive mechanisms on the wall of the room beneath the conning-tower, the presence of a hostile submarine? Or was this, after all, only a queer sort of gun-drill?

Suddenly the floor beneath their feet tilted forward so sharply that Joe almost lost his footing. Ledyard did not even change his position, but Wilcox turned to Joe.

"Don't get scared if your ears hum or even if your nose bleeds a bit," he warned. "We're going down now where the pressure's something fierce."

Then, even as the "X" was sliding down a long, invisible "shoot the chutes" through the black water, Wilcox stiffened, jerked his arm, and leaned forward. There was a hiss from the breech of the tube,

BENEATH THE WAVES

"Load!" snapped Wilcox.

Joe sprang forward, welcoming the chance of action. The "X" had struck! That little hiss of compressed air had meant that one of those deadly cylinders had gone shooting through the water at some target out there in the black depths.

Again and again the tube was loaded and fired, but no sound came to tell them whether or not their shots were striking home. They could not even guess at what sort of a target they were firing.

Only now, instead of running on an even keel, Submarine "X" was dodging, twisting, turning, like a trout trying to free itself from the hook in its jaw.

The suspense was more than Joe could endure any longer. "What do you suppose we're firing at?" he whispered to Ledyard, as their heads came close together over the breech of the tube.

"Submarine, probably," Ledyard answered, carelessly.

"What if they hit us?"

Ledyard grinned a superior grin. *His* nerves were proof against this sort of thing, and he was enjoying Joe's plight. "Well, that 'll be the end of us," he said. "We'll smash like an egg hit with an ax!"

Evidently Wilcox overheard, for he nodded comfortingly at Joe. "Don't let it get your goat, youngster!" he called. "There ain't a submarine in the world with half the speed or half the hitting

CLEARING THE SEAS

power we've got. You're as safe here as you'd be in your bed on shore."

If Wilcox could have seen the faces of the officers in the round room under the conning-tower at that instant his confidence would not have been so easy.

An instant later Wilcox bent his head to listen to something at the telephone, then turned again toward Joe. "Lieutenant wants you in the conning-tower, Lawton!"

As Joe darted out of the torpedo-room into the passage, the "X" suddenly heeled over to starboard so sharply that Joe was thrown against the steel wall of the passage. It was not like the other sudden twists the submarine had made; it was more like the result of some sort of a blow. Before the door of the torpedo-room closed behind him Joe heard Wilcox's voice, with a new note in it, exclaim:

"Great ghosts! Something out there is shooting at us!"

Joe opened the door of the room under the conning-tower and saluted as he entered the room. He hardly recognized the two officers. Lieutenant Carleton was jumping from one dial to another, shouting down the speaking-tubes, pressing buttons. Ensign Stanley, his eyes never leaving the ribbon of white paper, was chanting directions to the steersman on the little steel platform above his head.

"Help French with the wheel!" ordered the Lieutenant.

BENEATH THE WAVES

Joe clambered up the rungs of the ladder, and French, the man at the wheel, moved over a little to give him room.

"Don't know whether something's gone wrong or it's just the pressure," French exclaimed, "but I can hardly put her over."

The voice sounded so queer that Joe gave a quick look at the man beside him. French's face was white and drawn, his lips were tight closed, and his eyes were fairly starting.

"What's the matter?" Joe asked.

"Wait till you've seen a little and you'll know!" answered French.

Abruptly, from somewhere about the "X" a brilliant flood of electric light was flashed out into the water. Joe jumped at the suddenness of it so that he almost lost his footing. He caught a confused glimpse of waving water-plants, queer-shaped, bulging fish darting out of the way, and strange, impossible-looking shapes, when the brilliant light was switched off as abruptly as it had been turned on.

"Nothing!" shouted Carleton's voice below; "they've swung back starboard again. Over with her, French!"

As the two men tugged at the spokes of the wheel, French began to talk, with much the same note of relief in his voice that there had been in Clark's a few minutes before.

"Those Blues!" he began; "they fool us at every turn. They've thought of everything—

CLEARING THE SEAS

everything. We think we've got 'em beat, and they bob up with something better than our best. It's just like what they did with the air-ships up north the other day."

"You mean there's another submarine out there?" demanded Joe.

"Is there!" exclaimed French. "Wait till you see it! I don't want to see it again. I'd close my eyes if I dared! We thought the 'X' could play with any other submarine in the world. This Thing that's come from nowhere can run circles around us! Thank Heaven they can't shoot straight or they'd have had us ten minutes ago."

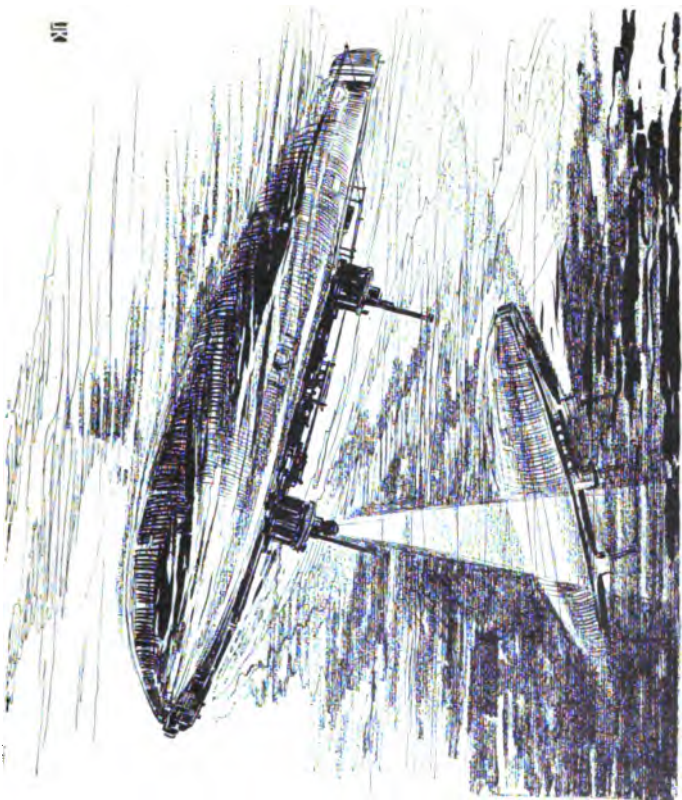
Again there came a sharp command from below, and the two men struggled with the stubborn wheel.

"Where are we, do you know?" Joe asked, when there was another chance for speech.

"Somewhere off New York harbor," answered French. "The Blues have been gathering ships in that direction for the past week, and the 'X' is going to rip the bottoms off some of 'em—if we ever get through this."

For the second time the flood of white light streamed out through the water, lighting up the strange mazes of the submarine forest.

"Can't keep the light on all the time," explained French; "it makes us too good a target. They've been doing the same thing, switching their light on and off. It's like blind-man's-buff."



DARTING, TWISTING, DIVING DEEPER INTO THE BLACK DEPTHS, THE TWO SUB-MARINES PLAYED THEIR FEARFUL GAME



BENEATH THE WAVES

Then, at the same instant that there came a shout from the Lieutenant below, French cried out: "There it is!"

Into the field of light darted a huge black shape, nearly as long as Submarine "X," and of greater diameter, shaped more like the earlier type of submarine. Joe caught a glimpse of a stream of bubbles whirling up from the rushing, snout-like prow, a row of black ports of some sort along the sides of the monster, three squat, flat conning-towers, and a big, flashing propeller.

The next instant the light vanished, from below came a wild shouting of orders and the clicking of machinery. Joe and his companion, guessing the order before it reached them, flung themselves against the wheel, and like a frightened fish the "X" leaped to one side and bored up toward the surface to escape the sudden attack.

How long the strange battle, fought there in the awful darkness of the water, lasted Joe had no means of knowing. Both submarines were firing their torpedoes at every possible opportunity, yet underwater gunnery was far from having the accuracy of ordinary gun-fire, and not a shot had gone home. But one shot, sent straight to the mark, would be all that was needed.

Darting, twisting, diving deeper into the black depths or shooting up on long slants toward the surface, the two submarines played their fearful game, now in a flood of brilliant light, now in pitchy darkness.

CLEARING THE SEAS

Then, when it began to seem that there never could be an end to the fight, that the two submarines might chase each other through the blackness until their supply of air was exhausted, out of the inky depths in front of the "X" the lights of the Blue submarine suddenly winked open.

Joe and French closed their hands on the spokes of the wheel, but long training triumphed; they waited for the order from below instead of obeying their natural impulses and throwing over the wheel.

This time, having the advantage of position, Submarine "X" struck instead of dodging. Joe could not see the brass cylinder slip from the forward torpedo-tube, but he did see all too clearly the explosion of the missile, the water blown to a whirling suds.

For a second, in the glare of her own lights, the Blue submarine could be seen to lurch and roll, a hole in her starboard side. Then, under the awful pressure suddenly released by the breaking of the hull, the whole thing was crushed inward as a celluloid ball is crushed by a pressure of the hand.

Mercifully the lights of the Blue submarine were extinguished at once, and the men in the conning-tower of the American vessel could not see all the horror of the catastrophe.

Joe heard the man at his side give a sob, then Carleton's voice shouting into one of the tubes:

"It's over! Get us up to the surface—quick!"

XXVI

FAILURE!

THERE was no rest for this new and terrible engine of destruction. Submarine "X" had struck her first blow and proved herself superior to the Blue craft of the same type. More submarines like the one they had destroyed might be encountered, but it seemed certain that there were no more of them in the immediate vicinity, and this meant that the "X" must seize this splendid opportunity without the loss of an instant.

Somewhere within a few miles of them lay ships of the Blue fleet. They might or might not know that their own submarine had been destroyed, but certain it was that they lay at Submarine "X's" mercy. Could she strike now and strike hard, the complete crippling of the Blue navy and the end of the war might follow. For no matter how successful the invading Blue armies might be on land, without their fleets to support them they could gain no lasting advantage.

While the submarine rested near the surface, the engines turned their power to renewing the

CLEARING THE SEAS

air-supply, and the officers discussed the plan of action and corrected their reckonings, the crew left their stations and came to the swinging tables in the long passage for dinner.

Of the entire crew Joe and French were the only ones who had witnessed the destruction of the Blue submarine. Yet none of the rest of the crew manifested the least curiosity, although they knew perfectly well what had happened.

The meal passed in much the same sort of silence that had surrounded the breakfast-table. Men spoke to the men next them, but there was no general talk, no laughter, no cheerfulness. The weight of the destruction they had caused, and the nature of it, hung too heavily upon them.

French pointed out the three men who formed the crew of the forward torpedo-tube, the one which had fired the torpedo that struck home.

"I don't envy those fellows," he whispered. "I'd rather have seen what we saw than have caused it, wouldn't you?"

And Joe admitted eagerly that he would.

As soon as the gloomy meal was finished the men returned to their posts, and Submarine "X" slipped down to the lower levels and started on her search for the Blue war-ships.

Joe was glad to be ordered back to the wheel instead of the torpedo-room. To be able to see—even though the sights were anything but pleasant—was vastly better than to be cooped up in that little room with its telephone and hissing air-jets.

FAILURE!

Like a hunting shark Submarine "X" prowled about the depths of the Atlantic, using all her delicate and sensitive mechanisms in the search for the Blue war-ships.

By bending forward Joe could look down between his feet and see the two officers in the room below. They were studying the faces of the strange dials, which were evidently connected with electrical or other devices that enabled the "X" to discover the presence of vessels in the water about or above her before their hulls were actually within the range of her lights.

A sharp-drawn "Ah!" from one of the officers made Joe look down.

Lieutenant Carleton and Ensign Stanley had their heads close together over a black dial with a white needle. Joe could just make out that the white needle had commenced to quiver and move a little to the left.

"Give her a point or two to port!" commanded Carleton, and at the same time Stanley called down the speaking-tube to the engine-room.

"Quarter speed!"

Through fear that other submarines might be in the neighborhood of the Blue fleet, Submarine "X" was now moving forward with no light showing. For a time nothing at all showed in the water in front, then Joe became aware of a faint, hazy brilliance far ahead and a little to the left of the submarine's course.

"Light of some sort off the port bow, sir!" he cried,

CLEARING THE SEAS

The speed of the submarine was still further reduced, and she began swinging in a long circle about the distant glare of light. Presently it seemed that there was more than one glare; Joe could make out three or four distinct patches of light. Submarine "X" lay to and waited for a long five minutes. The distant lights did not move.

"Just as I thought," Joe heard the Lieutenant say. "They aren't submarines; they're some sort of underwater lights on the ships themselves."

Cautiously the submarine began to move forward, heaving straight for the nearest of the white patches in the water. As the craft moved forward the lights became more and more brilliant.

"Fire the bow tube!" came Carleton's voice.

A few second's later the water some few hundred yards in front of the submarine was churned to froth by an explosion.

"Reverse!" went the order to the engine-room.

The "X" resumed her cautious circling, but did not go closer. From the two officers came the steady murmur of anxious speech.

The torpedo from the forward tube had exploded far short of the patch of light at which it had been aimed.

"I'm not such a fool as to think these things won't work," Joe heard the Lieutenant exclaim, "but I'm going to take her up where I can use my eyes."

In response to orders Submarine "X" slipped

FAILURE!

away from the strange lights, held steadily on her course for perhaps a quarter of an hour, then rose slowly to the surface.

Never had daylight looked so good to Joe as when the first flicker of it came down through the water and flooded the conning-tower. An instant later the round top of the tower actually rose above the surface, and not more than a mile away across the tumbling waves Joe could see ten or a dozen big Blue ships, seemingly riding at anchor, stretched out in a long line.

"They're there!" he said to French. "Those lights we saw below must come from the ships."

French nodded. "Some new trick of the Blues," he said.

Satisfied by the testimony of his eyes as to the exact location of the foe, Lieutenant Carleton took the submarine back under the water, but not before there had been a scarlet flash from the deck of one of the Blue ships and a shell had plumped into the water close to the vanishing shape of the submarine.

Back to the queer lights slipped the "X," and this time crept so close to them that inside each mass of light could be seen a gigantic black shape that Joe knew was the hull of a Blue war-ship.

The position of the submarine was ideal. The range was not more than a quarter of the distance at which the brass cylinders were effective—much less than that at which the Blue submarine had been destroyed.

CLEARING THE SEAS

To increase the accuracy of the firing, the "X" was again stopped, with her starboard tube bearing on the hull of the nearest ship. The tube was fired, and again the water—this time on the very edge of the lighted area—was shattered by an explosion.

Again and again the tubes were fired, one after another, yet always, the instant the brass cylinders entered the gleaming water surrounding the Blue ships they exploded, too far short of the mark to do any damage.

The Blues were able, either to so increase the pressure of the water in those lighted areas that the torpedoes were exploded, or to use electric currents of some sort for the same purpose.

"Do you know," French exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, "what would have happened if we'd tried to run the 'X' into those patches of light? She'd have gone up just the way those torpedoes did."

For nearly an hour the impotent submarine tried to strike through the invisible armor which surrounded the Blue fleet. Every one of the tubes was fired, and from every possible angle, yet with absolutely no effect.

"Take us up!" called Carleton's voice; and Joe was astonished at the unexpected lightness of the tone.

Half an hour later Submarine "X" came to the surface at a distance of several miles from the Blue fleet. This time, instead of diving again at

FAILURE!

once, she floated high in the water, the main hatch was opened, and officers and men came out onto the flat deck.

The men looked drawn and haggard, and every face told plainly of the ordeal they had passed through. They were glad of the sun and fresh air as so many rescued miners.

Yet Lieutenant Carleton, who stood looking back at the distant Blue ships, was smiling. "Men," he said, suddenly, "we've tasted both success and failure to-day. We've proved that this boat is the most powerful submarine afloat. And we've found that we can't sink the Blue battle-ships. How they do it we don't know. And I, for one, don't care. I'm glad we've failed, men, and I believe that the rest of you are. Those Blue ships have escaped us to-day—but we tried to stab them in the dark. And that isn't the sort of fighting we've been taught. We're going to beat them one day—just as sure as the sun rises. But, thank Heaven, we will do it with our feet on solid decks, and the blue water beneath us instead of over our heads."

And suddenly, without knowing exactly why, the little group on the flat deck of the floating submarine turned and cheered the distant ships which they had come out to destroy.

Ten minutes later, running only a few feet under the surface, Submarine "X" was slipping back to port from her first cruise—which was also destined to be her last.

XXVII

NEWS FROM THE LAND

FOLLOWING the return of Submarine "X" to the League Island yard, Joe had the longest period of inactivity he had enjoyed since the abrupt outbreak of the war.

The losses in men during the naval engagements had been sufficiently large to necessitate filling some gaps, and Joe was one of the experienced seamen told off for instruction duty. It was a hard pill to swallow, to be taken out of the very center of things and burdened with a task which was monotonous and uninteresting at best, and Joe was distinctly envious of Ted, who had won his "rate" as gunner's mate, and was on the point of going to sea in the recommissioned *Minnesota*.

But the few weeks of enforced inactivity did give Joe a chance to find out more of the actual state of the war than he had been able to learn while he was taking an actual part in some of its most stirring incidents. He realized that he had been too close to it to have a real idea of what it looked like, and in his spare time he fairly devoured old newspapers and weeklies, so that by the time the

NEWS FROM THE LAND

"rookies" under his instruction were ready to be transferred to one of the regular ships (the training period had, of course, to be greatly shortened) Joe had a pretty fair grasp of the general state of affairs.

He found that, although the war was only a few weeks old, it had already reached a critical period. The very nature of the Blue plan of campaign meant from the outset that it must be a short war. They had counted in a great measure on the fact that the Americans would not be prepared, and their blows had been struck when they were least expected.

And there was no denying that they had carried out their plans with a wonderful thoroughness. From the moment that their fleets swept down on the scattered vessels of the American squadron on the heels of the great storm, the invasion had moved with a machine-like precision, and neither in the North nor in the South had the Americans been able to check the progress of the invading armies.

In the North, bewildered and confused by the blows of the Blues, aided by their great balloon transports, the American forces had been beaten on every side, and a great army was being shut up and fairly besieged in the city of Pittsfield, with a great Blue victory seemingly the only possible outcome.

Employing almost identical tactics, and having a smaller defending force to contend with, the

CLEARING THE SEAS

Blue army of the South had overrun Texas and was now threatening New Orleans and the whole Mississippi Valley.

Over against these successes the failure of the destroyer's attack on the Canal and the destruction of the Blue submarine were the only American victories.

Joe understood now why the destroyer had made the attempt alone against the Canal. The Blues, having to keep open two great lines of communication with their fleets, had not dared spare the vessels for an attack in force; they had trusted to swiftness of attack, and for once they had failed.

Their armies on land might win battle after battle, but they had to be fed and supplied with ammunition, and these supplies had to be brought overseas. So that, after all, it was on the sea that the ultimate victory must be won.

And, while Joe was drilling his recruits and making them fit for the great work that was before them, both sides, resting a little from the tremendous activities of the past few weeks, were at the same time making gigantic preparations for the last phase of the great struggle.

Every one knew that it was certain to be the last phase, for two such mighty forces as were preparing could not meet and fight without one of them being so weakened that further fighting on its part would be impossible.

As in every game—for war is, after all, only a

NEWS FROM THE LAND

huge and terribly serious game in which the stakes are the futures of the warring nations—it lay with the victors to decide upon the next move.

The Blues had attempted an enormous task. They had invaded a country which military experts had said was safe from invasion. They had carried their schemes farther toward success than any one had believed possible. But now they had reached the crisis. They must strike the heaviest blow now, or see all their victories go for naught.

Joe Lawton, or any other person who gave the situation an hour's hard study, could see that there were two possible lines of action open to the invaders. They could keep their blockading fleets in their present positions along the Atlantic coast and in the Gulf of Mexico, allow the vessels of the Pacific Fleet to come through the Panama Canal, concentrate all their attention for the time upon the land campaigns, then strike with all their fleets at the united forces of the two American squadrons, risking everything on one great sea-fight, where victory would leave them virtual conquerors of a continent.

Or they could practically desert the two armies, leaving them for the time isolated in the heart of a hostile country, while they attempted to destroy one American fleet before the other could reach it, then wait with a vast superiority of forces for the arrival of the Pacific Fleet.

Both plans had their strong and weak points. Victory in either case would leave the Blues

CLEARING THE SEAS

masters of the situation. Defeat in the latter plan would not mean quite so complete a Blue disaster.

Joe spread a big map on the deck of the training-ship and studied it a long time.

"If I know the Blues as well as I think I do," he decided, "they'll take another shot at the Canal before they risk everything on a single fight."

And that same night he received orders which made him sure that his guess had been correct, and that the government had already received information which pointed to a second Blue attempt to close the Canal to the Pacific Fleet.

XXVIII

THE GATHERING OF THE SHIPS

NEVER in all the centuries which had passed since the bark canoes of the red man ventured along it had the Atlantic seaboard of the United States witnessed the going and coming of so many ships.

From such parts of the Maine coast as were not in the hands of the invading Blues to the most southern of the Florida Keys, ships of all sizes and kinds darted in and out of port, cruised up and down certain stretches of coast, pushed out into the Atlantic far out of sight of land, to come scudding back at night with signal-flags fluttering.

As by an invisible chain, the cities and towns of the coast were linked together by the sputtering white sparks of the wireless. Operators in shifts sat at the keys of the instruments day and night, and during every hour the air was full of the rushing messages.

Well inside this suddenly created cordon of vessels the gray ships of the Atlantic Fleet crept stealthily southward. Never out of touch with the land, their wireless in constant operation,

CLEARING THE SEAS

their great boilers holding in reserve a huge head of steam, the gray battle-ships steamed slowly toward Panama, yet ready at the first spark of warning to change their course.

Throughout this thousand-mile chain of ships there was a single watchword—"Find the Blues!" There had been no time to equip the hundreds of vessels with complete signal outfits, but every craft from the swift cruisers and hastily converted scout-ships (which had been passenger-carriers a few days before) to the tiniest gasoline-launch had been furnished with a bright-blue pennant and a blue lantern, and these signals were to be hoisted only in case Blue vessels were sighted.

For, as though its ships were no more than phantoms, the great Blue fleet had vanished.

Gone were the ships that had lain at anchor for weeks along the Maine coast; gone was the squadron of powerful battle-ships that had hovered menacingly for days a few score miles from Sandy Hook; gone, too, were the other Blue vessels whose black smoke had drifted for days across the waters of the Gulf.

One day they had been there, the next they had vanished, and a nation was hunting for them. A hundred chances to one the threatened blow would be struck at the logical point—the Canal. But the hundredth chance was the one the Blues so often took—and won by taking it!

Estimates gathered from all possible sources

THE GATHERING OF THE SHIPS

placed the strength of the Blue fleets in American waters at thirty battle-ships, an equal number of cruisers of different classes, and fully fifty smaller vessels of all kinds, in addition to the transports, etc.

Against this huge force the Americans could gather a fleet perhaps sixty per cent. as strong. With the addition of the Pacific Fleet they would be able to meet the Blues on almost even terms.

So passed three days of perhaps the greatest strain the American people were ever called upon to undergo. They knew that any hour might bring news of the decisive action of the war, that a day might destroy for ever the danger of actual conquest, or bring tidings that both coasts of the country were now at the mercy of the invading armies.

Rumors flew across country like wild-fire. The Blue fleet had been sighted off the Potomac; it had been seen along the coast of the Carolinas; it was at Cuba. Another wild flurry of extra editions printed a report that the Canal had been destroyed and all possibility of aid from the Pacific Fleet cut off.

And mixed with these rumors and counter-rumors came real tidings of a different sort.

Pittsfield had fallen into the hands of the Blues, but with its fall had come the end of the Blue supremacy in the air. A great American aeroplane had almost completely destroyed the fleet of Blue transport-balloons. From now on,

CLEARING THE SEAS

although the Blue armies might continue to win battles and capture cities, they could not move so rapidly from place to place, and it would no longer be so nearly impossible for the Americans to concentrate an army large enough to oppose their progress.

During those three days of strain Joe Lawton watched ship after ship steam south, heard from other men the news of hourly departures from other ports. Yet the great *Porto Rico*, to which he had been transferred, lay at her moorings, steam up, decks cleared for action, yet motionless.

As the hours passed and no news came of the Blues, it became perfectly apparent that by no possibility could the *Porto Rico* hope to reach southern waters in time to take part in the engagement which might occur at any moment.

Yet why the most powerful ship in the American navy—now that the *Alaska* was in the hands of the Blues—should be left behind, with the great battle of the war in prospect, was difficult to explain.

On the evening of the third day, when the great navy-yard was almost deserted save for the one monster ship and a few smaller craft, Joe sat on the gun-deck of the *Porto Rico*, mending a shoe and wondering what sort of things were happening to Ted Brandt on the *Minnesota*, already hundreds of miles to the south.

A sudden patter of feet on the gang-plank and

THE GATHERING OF THE SHIPS

a confused clamor of voices from the quarter-deck made him drop his work and hurry aft.

"They've found 'em!" he heard an excited voice saying. "Sighted half a dozen Blue war-ships at four o'clock off San Salvador, all headed south."

Forgetful that he was trespassing on the quarter-deck—sacred to the tread of the Captain—one of the recruits stood leaning against the rail, fairly panting with his news.

"Who saw 'em?"

"When did it happen?"

"Has there been a fight?"

"Are we going to sail?"

The questions fairly popped at the "rookie" from half a dozen men at once. He took his hands out of the pockets of his reefer to wave them helplessly.

How garbled a story the recruit might have told them Joe and the rest never knew, for a young ensign, coming up the gang-plank at a veritable gallop, heard the tag-end of the discussion and took pity on the men.

"Yes, it's true enough, men," he said, as half a dozen hands rose in salute to half a dozen flat caps, "the Blues have been sighted 'way to the south—dozens of ships, all headed for the Canal; but they haven't beaten us in the race this time! Admiral Harrison has sent a wireless to Washington announcing that he can throw a force between the Blues and Colon sufficient to at least

CLEARING THE SEAS

hold them in check until the arrival of the Pacific Fleet."

The men started to cheer, and the ensign was on the point of adding to his tale when another figure clad in dark blue appeared—this one emerging from the Captain's private hatchway, and ensign and all stiffened in salute.

By this time a considerable crowd of sailors had gathered on the forecastle, and Captain Edmands gave the men a long look before he acknowledged his subordinate's salute.

"I'm glad we have had the good news—for we must believe it good news—before we sail," he said, shortly. "The *Porto Rico* will have no chance to take part in the great battle for the possession of the Canal. But we have our work cut out for us. The land batteries in the outer defenses of New York City have been engaged with the ships of a second Blue squadron for more than half an hour, and we weigh anchor for New York in fifteen minutes!"

XXIX

SAVE NEW YORK!

NEVER did a ship go to sea cheered on by so vast a crowd as waved God-speed to the mighty *Porto Rico*. How the news that the long-expected had come to pass and a hostile force had finally attacked Manhattan Island had managed to spread over the city in almost no time at all was a mystery, but certain it was that in every quarter of Philadelphia and its suburbs men, women, and children seemed to know what had happened, and to know that the *Porto Rico* was going to the assistance of the metropolis.

Down the broad Delaware sped the great ship, gathering speed with every revolution of her big screws, past the wharves of the water-front, black with shouting people, through the tangle of shipping. Little tugs, clumsy ferries, steamers of all kinds, gave a wide, free way to the mighty warship, scudding to one side or the other with screaming whistles and clanging bells.

Even the marshy stretches of the Jersey shore were thickly lined with cheering crowds, and a host of small craft of all kinds followed the battle-

CLEARING THE SEAS

ship down the river and out into the broader reaches of Delaware Bay—in spite of the fact that the attack on New York might be only a part of the enemy's plan, and that other Blue ships were already steaming into the mouth of the bay.

A sailor, leaning against the port rail at Joe's side, drew a long breath. "Well," he exclaimed, "that makes it sort of worth fighting for, don't it?"

Joe swallowed at the lump that the sight of that tremendous crowd had brought into his throat. "Well, rather," he answered.

"And I'll bet you anything," the man went on, "that nothing like that happened when the Blue fleet sailed away from home. They aren't a bad lot, but they just aren't our sort of folks. They don't let go and yell the way we do—and that's why we're going to lick 'em!"

Many times afterward Joe thought of the man's words. He didn't remember what the man's face looked like half an hour afterward, but his words lodged in Joe's brain. After the war he heard and read many learned explanations of the final result, but he always wondered if the sailor on the *Porto Rico* had not hit closer to the truth than some of the scientists when he said that the "letting go and yelling" had a great deal to do with it.

But these thoughts did not come to Joe until long afterward. At the moment no man on board the *Porto Rico* had time for anything but the strictest sort of attention to duty.

SAVE NEW YORK!

The ship was rushing to sea with a definite goal, but had to be prepared for any emergency, and for a fight against long odds. No one knew the force in which the Blues had suddenly struck at New York; but it was certain that they would not make the attempt with a slender force, and it was almost as certain that for the second time in her short career the *Porto Rico* would be called upon to turn her guns upon more than one hostile vessel at a time.

Joe was devoutly thankful that this time he would not be called upon to fight a blind battle in the wild clangor of a steel pit where he could see and feel nothing of the battle but the awful suspense of uncertainty—even though the element of danger was increased many times.

This time, not turret or handling-room, but a slender 3-inch gun mounted on the superstructure a few feet aft of the bridge would be Joe's post. More than this, he would be captain of the gun-crew, and responsible for the handling of the gun throughout the course of the action—or as long as the gun and the men who worked it were able to fire a shot.

Although not yet in the presence of the foe, Captain Edmands took no chances of surprise or possible loss of time. The ship was partially stripped for action when she left her slip at the navy-yard, and while she was still some miles distant from the broad mouth of the bay the work of clearing was completed and the men—

CLEARING THE SEAS

even those in the most exposed posts—were sent to quarters.

Joe and the men of his gun-crew sheltered themselves as much as they could from the bite of the cold wind behind the steel screen which was their sole protection from the enemy's fire, and Joe (although he knew that the work had already been done) assured himself that the gun and the ammunition-hoist, which would feed it and several of the other light guns on the superstructure, were in working order.

Then they settled themselves for a long vigil. The *Porto Rico* was smashing her bows into the first gray rollers of the Atlantic on the long run of nearly two hundred miles to the north. Far above Joe's head the aerials of the ship's wireless cracked and snapped as the ship exchanged messages with the shore.

Once a white-capped cook, hurrying back from the wireless station where he had served the toiling operators with hot coffee, stopped long enough to give Joe and his companions a scrap of information.

"They've tried to pick up the Brooklyn yard, and can't," he said. "The air's full of stuff, but a lot of it seems to be Blue code, and we've never found a key to that. Don't know why we can't get Brooklyn. They've relayed stuff clear around from the big aerials at Arlington. The outer defenses were all safe at three o'clock."

And on this bit of uncertainty the shivering men of the gun-crew had to subsist during the long

SAVE NEW YORK!

hours of their watch. At four o'clock, following the regular daily routine, although the entire crew was at quarters, the men on watch were relieved, and Joe and his companions were glad to seek the shelter of the covered decks.

Captain Edmands had no intention of letting his men go into action hungry, and from the galleys a constant stream of huge pails of steaming coffee was being carried to all parts of the ship.

Somehow the spirit of the men, from grim Captain Edmands on the bridge to the rawest of the recruits who had been a "landlubber" a few weeks before, was different from what Joe had seen on the submarine, the Blue destroyer, or even the *Alaska*. There was no nervous tension, no muttering and whispering, no seeming uncertainty as to the outcome.

The men were as confident of the power of their ship and of their own superiority to their foes as though the victory already lay behind them. They laughed as they shivered at their posts on the cold, wind-swept decks, laughed and joked as they drank the hot coffee that was served to them, and treated it as nothing more than a lark when they learned that no hammocks would be lowered during the night and that they would have to sleep as best they could.

Even when the Navigating Officer added his word to the testimony of their senses, and assured them that a storm, possibly one of serious proportions, was gathering, they made light of it.

CLEARING THE SEAS

"We've weathered one storm, and we can just naturally buck through another!" shouted a big gunner.

"Yes," answered another, "and we've forgotten more about rough-water shooting than the best of the Blues will ever know."

As night fell the wind gathered force, and the air was full of flying sleet, but the worst fears of the officers were not realized. Although it continued to blow steadily, and the cold increased, they soon knew that they had experienced the worst, for the wind fell off somewhat in velocity about nine o'clock, and never regained the speed which it had momentarily threatened.

Mile after mile the sturdy engines drove the great ship through the big rollers. Far above the decks the lookouts, doubled and equipped with the most powerful glasses which they could handle, scanned the surface of the water, but from the time the ship had left the mouth of the bay not so much as a trace of smoke had been sighted.

There was no falling off in the high spirits of the crew. The men acted as though the deadly mission on which they were going was nothing more serious than a huge frolic. Toward midnight the leader of the ship's band approached Captain Edmands and told him that the musicians had volunteered to play on the berth-deck as long as the men cared to listen.

Captain Edmands, clad from head to foot in oilskins, and gripping the rail of the bridge with

SAVE NEW YORK!

numbed and cramped fingers, nodded with a grim smile.

"Play, sir, as long as your men can toot a note," he said. "And tell your men that I appreciate what they are doing."

At two o'clock in the morning a wild hail from the lookouts set the bugles to shrilling and the men flying to quarters, and a few minutes later the great ship stopped and rolled on the waves, while three men, half dead from cold and exposure, were taken from a fifty-foot sea-going launch.

What these men told the quiet figure on the bridge the men of the *Porto Rico's* crew never learned, but from that moment the vigilance of the watch was doubled, and the engines resumed their rhythmic beating at a speed which told the crew that the order "all you can make" had gone down the speaking-tube from the bridge, and that down in the hold the sweating stokers were fairly breaking their backs in the red glare of the open furnace doors.

Three o'clock came, and with it the news that one of the lookouts had reported hearing a dull, muttering rumble that sounded faintly above the rush of the water and the whistle of the wind. The great guns of the outer batteries still fighting with the Blue ships!

Half past three brought nothing but fresh squalls of wind and sleet and a seeming thickening of the darkness. Four o'clock passed, and the men

CLEARING THE SEAS

knew that the history they were to make was not far ahead of them now.

Five o'clock! Eleven long hours they had been plowing across the heavy seas. Now there was a faint tinge of gray along the eastern sky. Joe and his companions had returned to their posts. They had not been at their places for more than a few minutes when one of the men said, sharply: "Listen!"

All bent their heads as men will when they are trying to make out distant sounds, and almost at once Joe's ear caught the sound that, once heard, can never be mistaken for anything else under the sun—the low, far-carrying crash of great guns.

"Still at it!" exclaimed another of the gun-crew.

Joe nodded, forgetting that nobody could see the motion in the dim, ghostly light.

"The small guns like ours will get a chance this time," he said. "If the Blue ships have been fighting the mortar batteries and the other big-gun forts all night, they'll have been hammered into such shape that we'll get close. And if we do that, 3-inch shells are going to be worth just as much as the big fellows."

The third man of the crew, a short, stocky little fellow who had been a scene-shifter in a Broadway theater, could not get over the idea that the city which stood for the beginning and end of all things earthly in his eyes was actually being fired upon by hostile ships.

SAVE NEW YORK!

"Think of it," he kept exclaiming, "pitching shells at Washington Square and the Flatiron Building! Knocking bricks out of the Woolworth tower and shooting the statue off the Garden!"

Joe smiled in spite of the seriousness of the man's tone. "Why, Wilkes," he said, "the Blues can no more get their ships into the upper waters of the bay than they can fly! It would take them weeks to batter in the outer defenses—and I don't believe they could do it then."

Wilkes shook his head gloomily. "I dun'no'," he said. "I've seen them mortar batteries, and some of the gun-pits down at Coney. But I've seen more of the Blues than I like, and I'd hate like thunder to say there was anything they couldn't do."

It was the first note of the strange sort of unreasoning fear of the Blues that had cropped out during the first days of the war, and Joe wasted no time in changing the tone of the conversation.

"You'll find they've tackled more than they can handle already," he promised Wilkes, "and before the day's over they're going to have a lot more."

The steel-gray light of the winter dawn was coming faster now, the wind had shifted somewhat, and the sounds of firing grew louder and clearer. From the lookout forward came frequent hails, and hoarse answers and questions from the officers on the bridge.

Joe made out fragments of the calls, although

CLEARING THE SEAS

the wind whipped some of the words away from him.

"Seven ships, sir," he heard the man in the maintop call, "and it looks like a mass of them farther to the north."

Then a bit later:

"I think they've sighted us. One of them seems to be drawing off from the others and heading out to sea."

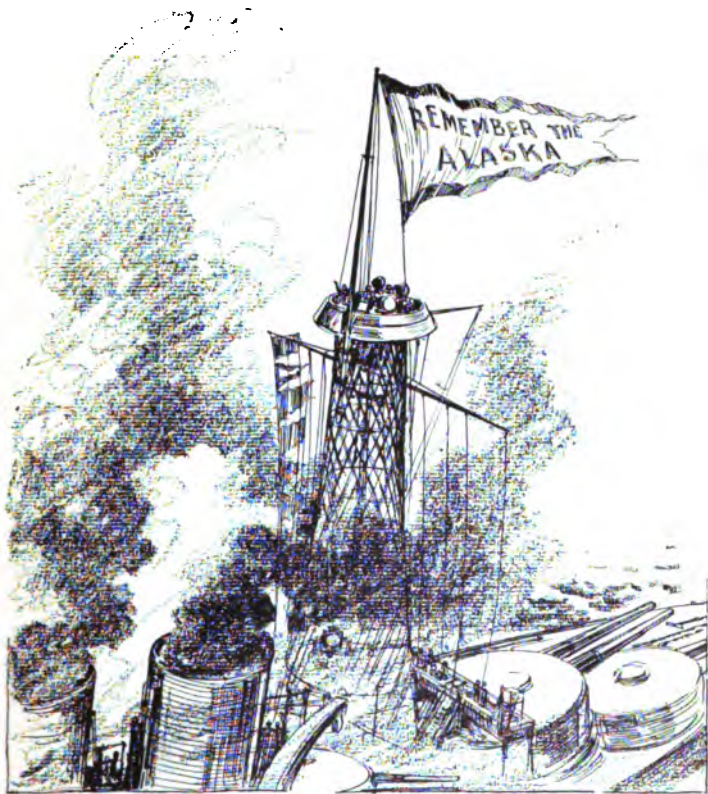
Almost with the lookout's words there came a screaming, rushing thing hurtling through the air over their heads, and something burst astern and sent the water up in a great spout into the air.

"That's no shell from a ship!" muttered one of the men, uneasily. "It's a 15-incher from the mortars!"

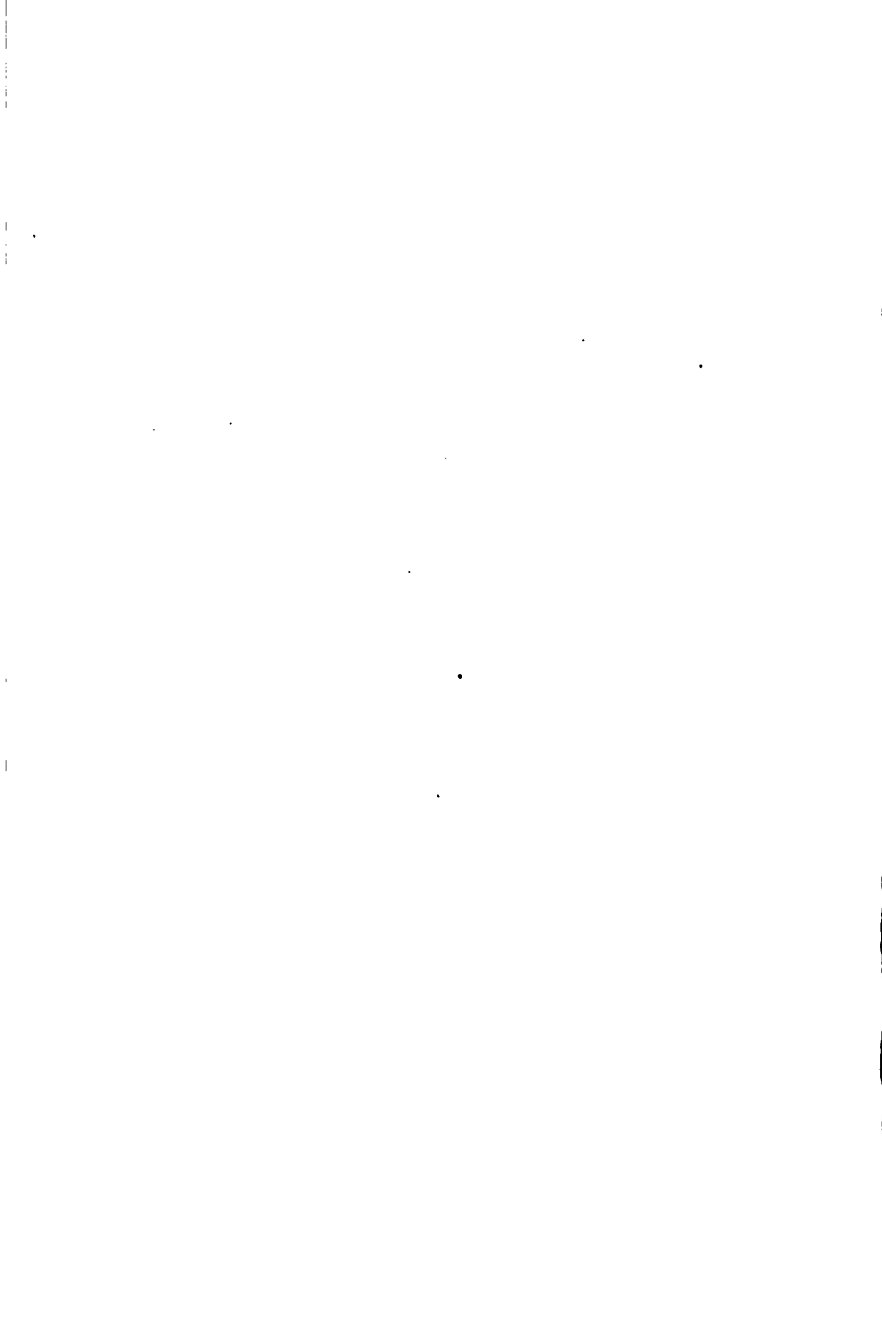
Joe was about to agree with him when he remembered what Ted had told him about the one-gun cruisers of the Blue navy—ships carrying one tremendously heavy gun forward, and trusting to their powerful engines to keep them at long range.

Within a few minutes it became certain that, whether or not the great shell had come from one of the Blue ships, a single vessel had detached itself from the fleet and was coming out to meet the *Porto Rico*.

In the growing light objects and surroundings began to take on their natural shapes and colors. Joe made out the vague, hazy outline of the Jersey shore, and the dim, shadowy dots to the west and north that must be the Blue ships.



A HUGE BALL OF BLUE BUNTING ROSE FROM THE BRIDGE AND BEGAN TRAVELING UP THE HALYARDS TO THE FORETOP



SAVE NEW YORK!

As the *Porto Rico* swung her blunt nose a little more to the north, that the guns of her forward turrets might be brought to bear on the ship which was moving out to meet her, a huge ball of blue bunting rose from the bridge and began traveling up the halyards to the foretop. As it caught the breeze and opened out the men on the decks of the ship looked up and saw in great white letters on the blue pennant the words:

"Remember the *Alaska*!"

The *Porto Rico* had sounded her battle-cry. This morning's work would be done with the name of the beaten sister-ship on every man's lips.

Up on the bridge Captain Edmands and the other officers had bared their heads, while from the tops, superstructure, and every point of the vessel from which the men could see came hoarse cheers that sounded different, somehow, from those that had followed the *Porto Rico* down the bay and out to sea.

Before ever the great guns of the forward turrets spoke for the first time, a second and a third great shell whizzed by close to the *Porto Rico*, and all doubt that the ship was engaged with a "one-gun cruiser" vanished.

Out to sea and away from her huge foe steamed the Blue ship, her huge gun banging away at intervals as she went. Like a bear following the livelier movements of a dog that attacks it, the *Porto Rico* swung round to follow.

Again and again the great gun of the distant

CLEARING THE SEAS

ship sent its huge missiles screaming through the air. The officers of the American ship studied the range and shook their heads. The target was still too far distant. They must get closer! Full speed ahead! The engines turned the water into froth.

Closer and closer to the rushing gray hull crept the thundering projectiles. Silent, guns ready, plugmen standing with the fuses in their hands, the *Porto Rico* smashed her way straight into the teeth of the enemy's fire.

But the Blue cruiser would not stand. Once it came to grips, she could no more cope with the American vessel than a cat could struggle against a panther. In her speed and the great reach of her one gun lay her chances of success.

Had the men who designed the Blue ship made all their calculations aright the *Porto Rico* might have charged to a splendid destruction, never able to close with her foe and strike the great sledge-hammer blows she was capable of delivering.

In smooth water it is quite possible that the lighter cruiser might have been able to show a clean pair of heels to her massive pursuer, but against the powerful thrust of an Atlantic norther she was at a disadvantage. She lifted more to the punch of the waves, her screws were out of the water and racing when they should have been gripping the water with every ounce of power. By the time the Blue ship had fired eight shots,

SAVE NEW YORK!

none of which had struck home, the *Porto Rico* had made a perceptible gain, and, as a mere threat of what was to come, the two guns of her forward 14-inch turret roared together and twenty pairs of glasses followed the flight of the shells, and a hundred voices shouted when they struck the water no great distance short of the hostile ship.

Desperately the Blue lashed out with its great weapon, one shell from which, properly placed, might reach the heart of the American ship.

Joe and his men stood behind their flimsy shield, unconsciously straining forward as the ship beneath them tore through the water, trying with their own muscles to push the huge steel mass close enough so that she could return the blows which were being struck at her.

"One of those shells and the stuff is off!" growled the pessimistic Wilkes.

But one shell, nor two, nor half a dozen would not stop the *Porto Rico* that day. Too late the Blue gunners, with their fate only too clear in their eyes, found their target. A great shell struck the *Porto Rico* six feet above the water-line, ripped through the steel plates as though they had been pasteboard, smashed through great bulkheads, knocked a 6-inch gun from its carriage as though it had been a toy, and burst. It was like the explosion of one of the minor magazines. It seemed as though the very vitals of the great ship must have been torn out—yet she had been planned

CLEARING THE SEAS

and built to receive just such awful blows and to survive them.

Her battery reduced by one gun, her hull showing a huge rent, her gun-deck strewn with wreckage, and the surgeons busy with their first dread work, the *Porto Rico* charged forward at undiminished speed.

And now those mighty engines had cut down the gap so that the great guns on the forecastle could go to work. Eagerly as hounds unleashed on a fresh scent the gunners sprang to their work, and the six steel tubes began slinging the 1,500-pound projectiles after the Blue ship.

Again the results of those long weeks on the range showed themselves. There was no wild shooting, no uncertain hunting for the correct range. One after another the shots struck home, the Blue's one gun fell silent, the Blue ship faltered, swung from her course, then deliberately turned her broadside to the pursuer.

On the bridge of the *Porto Rico* a young officer was waving wildly to the deck. "They've struck!" he cried. "They've struck!"

And from end to end of the great ship men slapped one another on the back, crying, "One for the *Alaska*!"

Then, without waiting to dispose of her first fallen adversary, the *Porto Rico* swung her prow toward the low line of coast where the great guns were still hammering without a pause.

XXX

THE PANIC

DURING the long hours of the night, while the *Porto Rico* was plowing through the water on her journey north, the inhabitants of New York City were undergoing an experience which Manhattan had not known since the day when an English fleet sailed in and took New Amsterdam from sturdy old Peter Stuyvesant.

That a hostile fleet might some time make an attempt against New York—the veritable heart and center of the nation—had been for years a possibility which made most men laugh and a few turn pale. Against this possibility there had been built defenses calculated to hold at bay any fleet which any European nation might send across the Atlantic.

There were mines, huge coast-defense guns mounted on disappearing carriages, great 15-inch mortars sunk in concrete-lined pits, capable of firing at ships far out at sea without exposing themselves to hostile fire.

And all these defenses were on the seaward

CLEARING THE SEAS

shores of outlying islands. The city itself was as seemingly immune from actual attack as Chicago or Pittsburg.

True, New York, like most of the other great cities of the eastern coast, had been stripped of most of her protecting vessels. Americans and Blues alike were bending every energy to the great struggle for the Canal.

But there had been no thought in the mind of any man, soldier, or civilian that the absence of the ships had left the city in actual danger. The wonderful system of harbor defenses was all-sufficient; behind them New York read its papers and lived its ordinary life in perfect security.

This same feeling of security was responsible for the situation in which the great city found itself. They had not seriously believed that the Blues would make the attempt. They might descend upon the comparatively defenseless coasts of Maine and Texas, they might even hurl their fleets against the Canal Zone, and it was conceivable that they might attack some of the other eastern seaports; but to actually attack New York was too much like a man's throwing himself head first against a stone wall.

At the moment when the New York papers—always the first to have news—flooded the streets of the city with extra editions announcing that the Blue war-ships had been sighted near San Salvador, the metropolis was really in gravest danger, not because the ships had left the harbor,

THE PANIC

or because the great land batteries were not enough to protect it, but because the mass of the people, having no fear of attack, were in exactly the state that breeds panic—and panic is a worse foe than big guns.

Once before during the war New York had actually heard the sound of hostile guns, but this had been in a sea-fight, and the Blue ships had not been numerous—or even within range of the harbor defenses. New York had laughed at danger, even when American ships came into the harbor bearing the scars of battle.

But now the first whisper of news that the guns at Fort William—the great 12-inch weapons on their disappearing carriages—were actually exchanging shots with an attacking fleet, threw the huge city into a panic.

There were a few moments—perhaps an hour—during which a sort of numbness seized upon the city. Crowds gathered, but stood silent, straining their ears to catch the sound of the guns.

On the heels of this numbness came blind, unreasoning terror. New York forgot the real strength of its defenses, forgot everything save the one horrible fact that the dreaded Blues were actually at the water-gates of the city. People lost their heads. Rich and poor alike began hastily gathering their valuables and making a mad scramble to get out of the city.

Inside two hours the great terminals of the Pennsylvania and New York Central railroads—

CLEARING THE SEAS

huge structures which had been built to take care of any possible amount of traffic—were jammed to the doors with a terror-stricken, wild-eyed mob.

Elevated, subway, and surface lines were jammed so that it became impossible to operate them on anything like the regular schedule. Broadway and Fifth Avenue, the great arteries for north and south traffic, became choked with a huge mass of moving people, all headed north.

It was of no advantage to possess an automobile or any other conveyance, for the streets were so jammed that it was impossible for vehicles of any sort to go faster than the tight-packed crowds of people.

Had the terrible panic limited itself to Manhattan Island alone no real damage would have been done, except those minor accidents which always follow such great gatherings of frightened people. But the fear-stricken inhabitants could not escape fast enough by land. They fell upon the vast amount of shipping of all kinds that lines New York's water-front, and sought escape in that direction. Within a few hours a city containing between four million and five million people had become a disorganized mob.

Whether or not the Blues had planned on this huge panic to aid them, or whether the move was only another of their bits of perfect planning, certain it is that a few hours before the outer defenses of New York were engaged by the Blue ships, two transports loaded with infantry and

THE PANIC

artillery, and convoyed by nothing but three torpedo-boat destroyers, slipped around the eastern end of Long Island, slipped along the Connecticut shore during the night, and landed unopposed some distance north of Manhattan Island.

So, at the moment when the panic was at its height, and all New York seemed trying to escape to the north, the frightened fugitives found their way blocked by Blue soldiers in that direction.

The Blues at this point did not need to fight. All that was necessary was for them to show themselves. When authentic reports stated that Blue cavalry had appeared in New Rochelle, Yonkers, and Jersey City, everybody believed that it had been New York and not the Canal that had been the objective of the Blue attack, that the invaders had fallen upon it with all their forces, and that the American cause—with the real heart of the country in the hands of the foe—was hopelessly lost.

Of course, this terrible situation was wholly unnecessary. Had the people of New York kept their heads, the great guns in the harbor could have kept the Blue ships from ever coming through the Narrows, and the little force which swept down from Connecticut would have been able to accomplish nothing but its own destruction. But the panic had now escaped all bounds and was communicating itself to the defenders themselves.

Scores of frightened people, believing their

CLEARING THE SEAS

escape cut off in all directions, fled from places of perfect safety and actually invaded the danger zone by rushing toward the batteries themselves. Overwhelmed by the rush of fear-crazed people, the defensive system became disarranged. Communication between the outer defenses and the Island itself was interrupted, and the report that the Blues had reached the heart of the city and actually seized the Sub-Treasury was actually believed.

Thinking themselves attacked in the rear as well as the front, and knowing that their great guns could not be turned on this fresh foe without destroying the city itself, the officers in command of the shore batteries—brought face to face with a situation which could not possibly have been foreseen—ceased firing until they could get some grasp of the actual situation.

It was at this moment—when panic had actually laid the great city open to the Blues, and the Blue war-ships were actually steaming toward the inner harbor!—that the *Porto Rico*, leaving the wreck of the Blue cruiser behind it, headed at full speed for the stricken port.

XXXI

THE RESCUE

FROM his position on the superstructure, Joe saw the sudden movement of the distant Blue ships toward the harbor, although neither he nor any one else on board the *Porto Rico*—ignorant as they were of the great panic—could understand the significance of the move.

"They've silenced the batteries!" gasped one of the men.

"Nothing of the sort!" answered Joe. "The whole Blue navy couldn't silence those batteries!"

Without waiting to see what was the possible cause of the unexpected move on the part of the Blues, Captain Edmands took his own course without wasting a second.

While the *Porto Rico* was still too far from the distant ships to do anything like effective work, the six 14-inch guns in the turrets forward began firing. The shells would at least remind the Blues that all their foes did not lie in front of them.

"Keep your shots low!" went the word from the fire-control station aloft to the men at the

CLEARING THE SEAS

guns. "Remember that New York lies the other side of the Blues!"

Doubtless the destruction of the cruiser had been witnessed from the other Blue vessels, and the commander of the Blue fleet had decided that, no matter how close he was to the goal which no man had believed could be reached, he could not neglect the presence of this rushing, steel-spitting monster that was tearing through the waves astern!

Not more than a minute after the *Porto Rico's* guns had commenced to bark at the heels of the Blues, a shout went up from every man on board who occupied a position where he could see.

"They've turned! They're coming back!"

Sure enough, four of the distant black dots on the surface of the gray water swung in big circles, strung themselves out in a long line and steamed back over the water they had just crossed.

Captain Edmands gave his orders in the same quiet tone in which he would have asked the ship's electrician to repair the incandescent reading-light in his cabin.

"You will concentrate your fire upon one of the enemy's ships until it is out of action," he said to the Executive Officer, "then turn to whatever vessel seems to be troubling us the most."

A slim, second-class battle-ship on the left of the Blue line, conspicuous because of the height of her five tall funnels, was the first to run into that iron hail.

THE RESCUE

Across six miles of gray water sped the shells of the *Porto Rico*. Officers said afterward that the men must have worked the guns with one eye on their task and the other on the blue flag with the ship's battle-cry on it that snapped in the air over their heads.

Never on the target-range had the great guns made better scores. There was too much at stake for time or ammunition to be wasted in misses!

Joe and his companions stood erect, forgetful of the Blue shells which were droning through the air or ricocheting across the waves. Their time had not yet come. The range was still too great for their gun. They could only stand and watch.

As a snow fort crumbles under the pelting snow-balls of its assailants, so the Blue ship seemed to go to pieces under the hammering of the *Porto Rico's* shells.

For twenty minutes that must have seemed like twenty centuries to the overmatched men of the Blue ship, the slim battle-ship fought against the great shells that were tearing her to pieces.

At the end of those twenty minutes, the command went to the *Porto Rico's* gunners:

"Concentrate on the next ship!"

During the first phase of the fight, the three Blue ships which had not been under fire had steamed closer and were commencing to bring their lighter guns to bear. Now the *Porto Rico*

CLEARING THE SEAS

swung her twelve "fourteens" from the ruined battle-ship to a big armored cruiser.

Mere numbers were of no avail. Although three ships were concentrating all their fire upon the *Porto Rico* and inflicting some damage on the upper works of the ship, they could not stop the roaring of the guns in the big turrets, they could not save the armored cruiser!

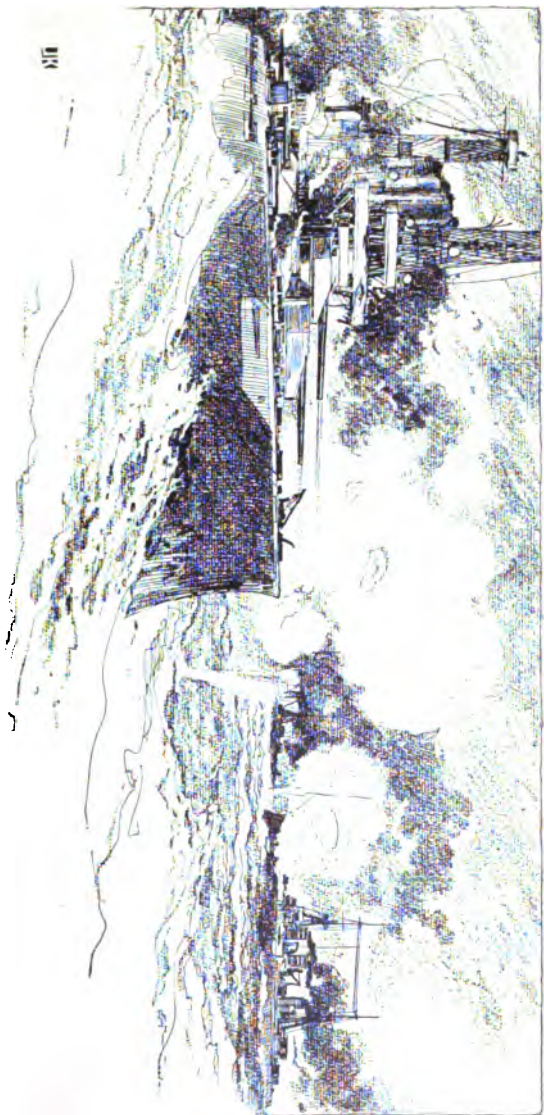
Like the battle-ship which had already been put out of action, the cruiser crumbled. One after another her flashing guns fell silent. Twenty minutes had been enough for the battle-ship; twelve saw the cruiser helpless!

"Now for the little fellows!" thought Joe as he glanced at the two smaller Blue ships, "and then comes our chance!"

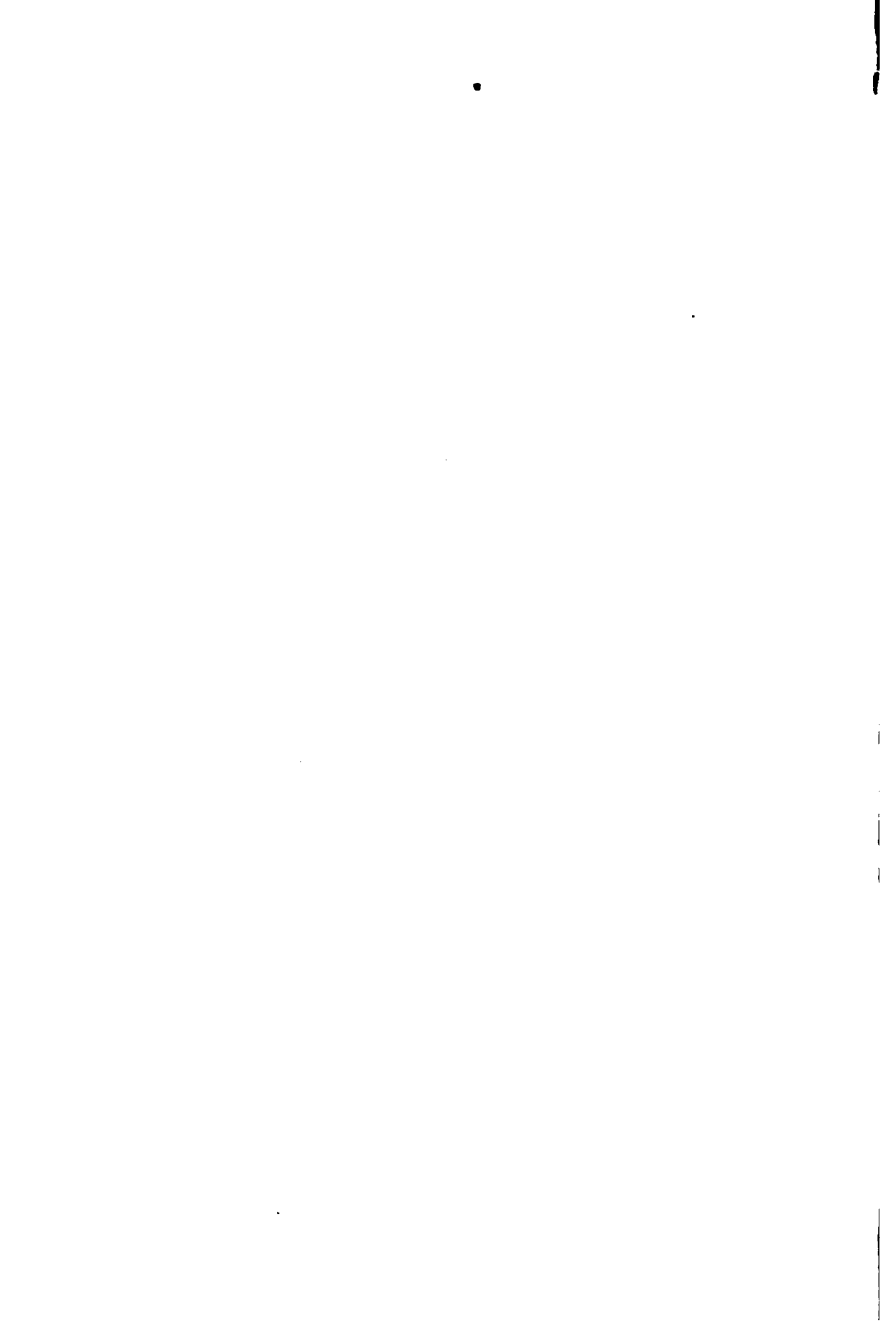
But the mere sinking of ships whose fire could not actually harm him formed no part of Captain Edmand's plan. He might have spent half an hour in destroying the two Blue war-ships whose small projectiles were stinging the sides of the great ship. But that would gain nothing.

From the men in the launch that the *Porto Rico* had picked up he had learned something about the state of the city. He knew that the mere sight of an American war-ship in the inner harbor, of boats loaded with Yankee sailors making for the wharves, would check the panic and save the city from its own fear.

"Full speed ahead!" went the order to the *Porto Rico's* engine-room.



THE "PORTO RICO" SWUNG HER TWELVE "FOURTEENS" FROM THE RUINED BATTLE-SHIP TO A BIG ARMORED CRUISER



THE RESCUE

Paying no more attention to the Blue ships than as though their shells had been swarms of mosquitoes, the *Porto Rico* steamed straight between them, slashing out with her 7-inch broad-side guns as she passed.

Whether or not the *Porto Rico* could have accomplished single-handed the task she had set herself that day can never be told. Not a man on board her but believes that she could have followed up her earlier triumphs by destroying the four Blue battle-ships and the three cruisers that still lay before her.

But she did not have to make the fight alone. It was true that every sea-going war-ship had left New York harbor and steamed south days before, but there remained four old coast-defense monitors, vessels built after the pattern of the famous *Monitor* of the Civil War.

They were slow-moving, clumsy vessels, designed for service close to the shore. They had but a single deck, and very little of the ship showed above the surface of the water. Two of them carried two guns each, the others four, but the guns were 12 and 13-inch weapons, and by no means to be despised in an emergency.

One of these veterans had seen some service in the Spanish-American war. The other three, although they had been old ships before the keel of the *Porto Rico* was laid, had never fired a shot in real service.

But, old engines clanking rustily, decks under-

CLEARING THE SEAS

water most of the time, out through the Narrows they came just as the Blue ships were beginning to close in on Staten Island and the inhabitants were wildly fleeing from the coast towns and villages.

Of this splendid fight of the old ships the men on the *Porto Rico* could see little or nothing until they came rushing into the last stage of their own great battle. They could see only that the distant ships toward which they were steaming were engaged with something still farther away, and supposed, of course, that some of the strangely silent land batteries had recommenced firing.

Before long, however, the sharp eyes of the lookout and the powerful glasses on the bridge made out the true nature of the *Porto Rico's* unexpected helpers, and word that the old monitors had come out to fight went from foretop to engine-room.

Then there went up from the crew such a cheer as even the hoisting of the great blue flag with its white motto had not raised.

It was as though four old men had risen from their beds, picked up their rusty guns, and come out to do battle when the young blood had failed. There was something about it far more moving than any other incident of the great war.

Down in the engine-room of the rushing battleship the word wrought miracles. The Chief Engineer, a gray-haired veteran who had seen years of service, slapped his leg with a shout.

"If they've got the nerve to bring those old

THE RESCUE

relics through the Narrows in the teeth of a norther," he exclaimed, "and then take 'em into action on top of all that, I'll get two or three knots more out of these engines if I send my boilers up through the decks!"

And he carried out all of his threat—except blowing up his boilers. He put the *Porto Rico's* engines to such a strain as their hardest tests had not given them, forced them until his assistants shook their heads and vowed that "the old man would tear 'em loose from the bed-plates!"

Again the forward guns of the battle-ship began reaching for her distant foes, but there was no decrease in the vessel's speed. The science of modern warfare was thrown to the winds in this day's fight. The *Porto Rico* might have kept at long range and, aided by the halting fire of the old monitors, held the Blues at even terms without suffering any great loss herself.

But the crew of the ship were fairly wild with desire to close with their foe, and Captain Edmands, being a keen student of men as well as a good sailor, knew that his ship would be more formidable if she could come to grips.

Into the far edge of the fight steamed the battle-ship, and instantly the Blues swung their guns away from the battered monitors and concentrated their fire on the *Porto Rico*.

The Blue ships, however, were not the vessels they had been a few hours before, and the full force of their fire was not what it had been earlier

CLEARING THE SEAS

in the day. They had suffered somewhat from the fire of the shore batteries, and bore some few scars inflicted by the old guns of the raftlike vessels which were still facing them.

Like a floating volcano the battle-ship steamed into the fight. Not only the big guns in the turrets, but the smaller guns of the broadside batteries flashed into action now, and a few seconds later Joe was on his feet, pushing with all his strength on the shoulder-piece of the slender 3-inch quick-firer as the light guns of the secondary batteries commenced their shriller music.

It was the first time Joe had been called upon to actually direct the fire of a gun. He selected the bridge of the nearest Blue cruiser (he called it "near," although the vessel was a good two miles away) as his target, and sent his shells home as fast as they could be shoved into the open breech.

He was not excited—not half as excited as he had been during the fierce rush across the bay when all he could do was watch the distant fight without having a part in it. He forgot every consideration except keeping the sights trained on the distant target and driving the men of the gun-crew at the top of their speed.

Forgetting that his voice was perfectly inaudible in the din of firing, he turned from time to time and shouted in the general direction of the ammunition-hoist that was supplying his gun and half a dozen others:

THE RESCUE

"Faster, there, faster!"

For several minutes he saw nothing of the battle except the bridge of the Blue cruiser. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a stubby, queer-looking war-ship, its deck under-water, its stack gone, hammering away with the two guns of its single turret even while its stern settled lower and lower into the water.

"One of the monitors gone!" a voice bellowed in his ear.

Joe nodded. He had seen that, but he had seen something else that was far more important. From the center of one of the Blue ships a thick column of black smoke that did not come from the stacks was rising steadily into the air. The shells from the antique monitors had set her on fire.

Even with the odds thus reduced, they were still long. One of the monitors had sunk, the second was helpless, and a third was being swiftly overwhelmed by the fire of the two Blue ships closest to it.

The *Porto Rico*, by no means at her best after all she had gone through, had still to face two battle-ships and three cruisers.

Some idea of the hopelessness of these odds must have flashed into the brain of the man who commanded the fourth monitor. His ship, owing to its position, had escaped thus far with comparatively slight damage. Yet his turret, long un-

CLEARING THE SEAS

used, had jammed, and his two guns were little better than useless.

His engines were not much better off than the rest of his ship, but they were capable of driving the old hulk about twelve miles an hour, and that speed was sufficient for his purpose.

Running to the top of his stumpy mast signal-flags which warned Captain Edmands of his intention, he left the shallow water close to shore, which had protected him, and headed out to sea.

"Look at that monitor—what's she trying to do?" shouted Wilkes, as he struggled with the rammer.

Straight for the largest of the Blue ships headed the monitor, making hard work of the heavy waves, almost burying her forward turret under every big sea, but staggering forward somehow.

Could the Blue ship have turned all her power upon this strange foe, she might have sunk the monitor while the latter was still several thousand yards distant. But many of her guns were silenced, and most of the others were already engaged with the stern guns of the *Porto Rico*. She attempted to defend herself by hammering at the monitor with her bow guns and signaling frantically to her consorts.

Joe saw what the monitor was attempting, but neither in his mind nor in that of any other man who watched the spectacle did the idea dawn that the attempt would succeed.

Yard after yard, rolling and pitching as though

THE RESCUE

she would never be able to make it, buffeted alike by the heavy seas and by the crashing shells from the Blue ship, the old vessel wallowed on its way.

Now the Blues were rousing themselves and answering the signals of the threatened flag-ship. Two of the three cruisers, smoke pouring from their funnels, were making all speed in an effort to close in on the limping monitor, for the truth had dawned on them.

Something had gone wrong with the steering-gear of the Blue flag-ship. She could still fight, but she could not get out of the monitor's way.

The issue lay between the hurrying cruisers and the old warrior. Neither the *Porto Rico* nor the other Blue ships could do anything.

A quarter of a mile separated the monitor from her foe when a terrific explosion—whether caused by a Blue shell or something inside the vessel—seemed to tear her upper works to pieces.

"She's gone!" went up the shout from the *Porto Rico*.

But the monitor retained enough life in hull and engines to plow forward. Rolling, lurching, yawing like a rudderless craft, smoke pouring up through half a dozen great rents in her deck, she staggered crazily over the last few yards of the awful course she had run, seemed to hang for an instant on the crest of a great wave, then crashed forward into the side of the helpless Blue.

Under the tremendous impact of the old ship's ram the Blue flag-ship heeled over until it seemed

CLEARING THE SEAS

that she would never right herself, then bent like a log that has been cut part way through. One roaring explosion after another split the air, great clouds of smoke and steam roared up, and with an awful rush of sound that made the men at the guns of other ships turn pale, battle-ship and monitor together plunged down in a whirling foam of water.

XXXII

TRIUMPH!

UP through the crowded shipping of the inner harbor steamed the *Porto Rico*. On the skyline behind her were four plumes of black smoke where the surviving Blue war-ships were speeding toward the open sea.

Off Battery Park the powerful engines stopped, the anchor-chains roared through the hawse-holes, and the boatswains' pipes sounded shrilly: "Landing-parties away!"

Boat after boat, crowded with marines and bluejackets, left the ship and started across the water. From every side steamers, launches, even rowboats and canoes, crowded close for a better sight of the ship and men who had come to the city's aid.

Joe Lawton was one of the first men ashore from the leading boat. He found himself and his few companions in the midst of a wild-eyed, roaring crowd of men and women that would not leave the bluejackets room to form their lines.

Half a dozen men, tears streaming down their

CLEARING THE SEAS

cheeks, their clothes half off their backs, their voices hoarse from shouting, were patting Joe's back and shoulders and trying incoherently to tell him how glad they were. He saw women throw their arms around the necks of sailors—and was glad that he had escaped at least that part of the demonstration.

Finally, a way was cleared, and the landing-party—three hundred men and three guns—started forward. Up through the stone-lined cañon of Broadway, past City Hall and the towering buildings they marched between solidly packed masses of shouting people.

There was no object of attack, no reason for their landing except to restore confidence to the fear-crazed people.

"Take 'em as far as the Flatiron Building, then bring 'em back," Captain Edmands told the officer in charge. "That should do the trick. I don't think there's a Blue within fifty miles of Manhattan this minute!"

As the vanguard of the sailors passed through the shouting crowds in front of one of the newspaper-offices, a man with a megaphone bellowed at them from an upper window in a voice which carried above the shouting of the crowd:

"The Pacific Fleet is just going through the Gatun Locks!"

Joe's heart bumped up into his throat. New York was saved! The Canal was saved! The

TRIUMPH!

keels of the Pacific Fleet were cutting the waters of the Atlantic!

The end of the great war was close; even now they were beginning to clear the decks for the last act!

XXXIII

THE SOUTHERN FIGHT

"NO," Ted Brandt said, slowly, "I'm not sure that I envy you, Joe. It must have been great to see that monitor ram the Blue flagship and all the rest, but what we saw down South was about as fine."

In spite of the sharp wind which whistled across the water, the two young sailors were sitting on the forecastle of the *Porto Rico* as she lay at her slip in the Brooklyn Navy-yard. The great harbor was no longer stripped of American warships. They were everywhere, great and small, some undergoing repairs, others ready to put to sea at short notice.

High above the boys' heads, a pneumatic riveter rattled insistently where workmen were repairing a gaping hole in the *Porto Rico's* forward stack. From below came the clang of steel that told of work being pushed forward to repair damage done by the single shell from the "one-gun cruiser" that had crashed through the war-ship's lower decks.

Ted, brown from the days in southern waters,

THE SOUTHERN FIGHT

had been transferred again, this time to the same ship on which Joe was serving. An exchange of prisoners had been effected, and all the survivors of the *Alaska's* crew had been transferred to her sister-ship, the *Porto Rico*.

"Of course," Ted went on, "what I saw wasn't so much of a battle. I missed that part of it."

"I wish you hadn't," admitted Joe. "I haven't had a chance to talk to anybody that did see it. Of course I've read the papers and all that, but it isn't the same."

"I don't believe you missed a great deal," Ted said. "There wasn't anything to see! It was the only battle of the war that went according to theory. By all the rules of gunnery, no ships should have been able to come close enough to the batteries at the Canal to reach the shore with their fire—and that was just what happened."

"And let me tell you, Joe, it was no fun for us fellows of the fleet to have to sit still and listen! There we were, eighteen big ships. We'd won the race, we'd reached the Isthmus in time to meet the Blues—and they wouldn't let us do it!

"Of course it was a wise course! As they've found out since, there were thirty-eight Blue ships out there, waiting for us. On the sea we're better than the Blues, better all around. But we couldn't have won against those odds. It would have been just like those fights after the great storm. They'd have lost more ships than we did, but our fleet would have been just about

CLEARING THE SEAS

wiped out—and the Admiral knew we couldn't afford to lose eighteen ships for the sake of glory!

"So there we lay for four days inside the breakwaters, knowing that the Pacific Fleet was getting closer every hour, praying that the Blues would wait until they came, yet knowing at the bottom of our hearts that they never would do it.

"They'd have been better off if they'd waited, but they didn't. I believe getting so close to the locks with that destroyer a couple of months ago was a bad thing for the Blues. It made them think the Canal defenses didn't amount to so much. Well, they found out that sneaking in with one little ship and trying to batter down the forts with a fleet were two mighty different things."

Joe interrupted with a restless shake of the head.

"What I can't understand," he said, "is what has become of all their air-ships and submarines all at once. You'd have thought the attack on the Canal was just the place for them."

"They lost most of their balloons in the air-fights around Pittsfield," answered Ted, "and something has been wrong with their submarines from the first. They must have thought we had a lot of boats like Submarine 'X'!

"Anyhow, they didn't try to use anything but the guns of their fleet. They began the attack at ten o'clock in the morning, and kept at it until dark. I was sorry for the boys on shipboard.

THE SOUTHERN FIGHT

They couldn't tell what was going on, and they must have itched to get into things.

"They sent detachments ashore from some of the ships to serve as relief crews for the big guns. Nobody knew, you see, just how big a thing it was going to be. They knew the forts *ought* to be safe—but we thought the Blues could never get into New York harbor, and a lot of other things.

"Nobody can ever talk to me again about a fight between two war-ships being a cold-blooded affair. Of course, it's at long range, and some of the men can't see, and all that, but it's bloody hand-to-hand fighting compared to the work they do in those gun-pits!

"Why, Joe, a dreadnought has no more chance against one of those forts than a sixteen-foot launch, armed with a one-pounder, would have!"

"I know," agreed Joe. "I've seen 'em."

"Just seeing them wouldn't make you understand," persisted Ted. "I sat for four hours with my head sticking out the door of a bomb-proof, and watched. And what I couldn't see a gunner with a broken arm explained to me.

"There's no more guesswork about ranges with them than there is in shooting a rifle at a knot-hole ten feet away! They *know*! All the water in range of those guns is plotted and laid out in numbered squares. They train one gun, or as many as they like, on one of those distant squares. From two range-finding stations they watch the

CLEARING THE SEAS

progress of a hostile ship. It's just the simple old 'trig' idea of completing a triangle. When that ship is at the meeting-point of the two lines of sight from those two stations, she's in the square that gun's trained on. A signal-bell rings, they fire the gun—and that's all there is to it!

"You couldn't help feeling sorry for the Blues. They were just targets. They'd come into range, and those 15-inch mortar shells would commence dropping down on them.

"Of course, their one chance was to get close. They tried it! Trust the Blues to try everything that's possible. Six of 'em tried to rush it. Four of them limped out of range again. We saw the masts of the other two sticking out of the water the day we sailed north."

"What if they'd all tried at once—all thirty-eight of them?" Joe wondered.

"Why, some of them would have got close, all right," admitted Ted, "and they might have done a little damage to the forts, but that would have been all."

Joe considered, trying to call up the picture Ted's words had painted. Yes, after all, he was glad he had gone to New York on the *Porto Rico*. None of the fights he had watched and taken part in had been one-sided affairs.

"But the fighting wasn't the best of it," Joe went on, after a short pause; "the night the ships of the Pacific Fleet came through the locks was

THE SOUTHERN FIGHT

the finest thing I've ever seen. We'd known for days they were getting close, and all the time the forts were holding off the Blues we were talking with our own ships by wireless, and they were begging us to hold on till they got there. We heard the guns at the other end of the Canal saluting when they came in sight. We thought they'd come through that day, but by that time there wasn't any great need of hurrying, and they came through at night. I wish you could have seen it. There we lay just inside the breakwater, the eighteen ships of the squadron and a whole raft of little fellows. It was bright moonlight, and you could see the locks plain as day. One by one the big ships began coming through the locks and out into the bay. They didn't look like just our war-ships, Joe; they looked like something bigger and more powerful, something that neither Blues nor any one else could beat."

"I'll bet you cheered your heads off!" Joe said.

"That's the funny part of it!" replied Ted. "We didn't. Nobody said a word. We were two or three miles away, and you could hear the exhaust from the ships just as plain as though you were on board."

Joe did not precisely understand this sort of thing. A little later he was to know exactly how Ted had felt when he watched the great ships coming through the Gatun Locks in the moonlight, but now he could only think that it was

CLEARING THE SEAS

very strange that nobody had felt at all like cheering.

The talk shifted to what might lie in the future (for the war was not over, by any means, although the end seemed in sight), until the whipping of the wind finally drove them below.

XXXIV

THE NEW PHASE

FOLLOWING the double check that had been inflicted upon the sea forces of the Blues, coupled as it was by the destruction of most of their air-ships by the great war-aeroplane near Pittsfield, the war assumed an entirely new character.

The supremacy of the sea, which the Blues had maintained since the scattering of the American fleet by the great storm, and the destruction of several American ships in several engagements like that in which the *Alaska* was captured, was now fast slipping out of the Blues' hands.

The number of Blue vessels in American waters was no larger, if, indeed, as large, as the force of the defending fleets, and it had been proved that the invaders, ship for ship and gun for gun, were no match for the Americans.

On land the situation was peculiar. The Blue armies held all the ground they had gained, but the task of winning more was no longer the simple matter that it had been.

From the first there had been no question of the

CLEARING THE SEAS

bravery or fighting qualities of the American soldiers. But they had always been outnumbered, and they had been called upon to fight an army whose organization was infinitely superior to their own. Furthermore, the Blues, aided by their great balloon transports, had been able to strike from so many different directions that their foes had been baffled and beaten, and one Blue victory had followed another with discouraging regularity.

This condition had held true in the southern territory that had been invaded as well as in the North, and, could the Blues have maintained their naval supremacy, nothing seemed more likely than that the two invading armies might unite and fairly overrun the richer parts of the country, capturing most of the large cities of the East and Middle West, thus forcing the Americans to grant the unreasonable demands which had caused the war, and sue for peace on such terms as they could get.

But with the destruction of the air-ships and the serious crippling of the fleets matters took on a vastly different aspect.

Instead of having the entire surface of the country practically at their mercy, the invaders were now confined to such parts of the country as were within easy reach of the great bases of supplies they had established, or those parts on which their armies could live by foraging. And with winter coming on swiftly, this way of feeding a great body of men was uncertain at best.

THE NEW PHASE

No longer could the Blues, without their airships, strike this way and that, confusing their foes by the very uncertainty of their attack. Their armies became fixed, and it was a simple matter for the Americans to concentrate against them.

It would have been the course of wisdom for the Blues to have given up a hopeless task. They had attempted the invasion of a country too large and too powerful to be conquered by any foreign foe. Because they were a military people and their opponents were not, they had dreamed that the conquest would be possible. They had accomplished wonders from a military point of view, yet their main object was beyond their reach.

Yet their perseverance and their natural pride in their military prowess drove them to continue the struggle. They would not give up while there was even a slim chance of success.

They still held the great bases of supplies in Maine and Texas—places which the Blues had by this time, of course, turned into veritable fortresses. They still had a splendid fleet in American waters. Their armies in the field were still undefeated and vigorous. They hung on stubbornly, and the first peace overtures of the American government were repulsed.

The course of the Americans was decided for them. The keys to the Blue position were now the two great bases of supplies. Once these were

CLEARING THE SEAS

in the hands of the Americans, the Blue armies would be lost, and the Blue fleets no longer enjoyed a superiority of numbers sufficient to make possible the landing of a third invading army.

So it was against these great bases of supplies that the last blows of the great war were destined to be struck.

Had it been possible to do so American ships would have fallen on these important points immediately after the Pacific Fleet entered the Atlantic, but several things prevented such a plan being carried into effect.

When the great Blue fleet moved south its forces had not been scattered as much as those of the Americans, who, although they had taken chances and removed the defenses from many points as they had from New York, had still been forced to divide their forces to meet emergencies.

Thus, instead of attacking the Blue fleets at once, after they had failed completely in their attack upon the Canal forts, the Americans had to allow them to sail north again while they gathered their own forces for the final attack.

As there were two of these great supply depots to be attacked, a careful watching of the retreating Blue vessels was necessary, in order that the Americans might know what forces they would encounter in both cases.

Fleet scout-ships, cruisers, and torpedo craft hung as close to the Blue fleet as was possible when the hostile vessels, following their check at

THE NEW PHASE

the Canal, commenced their last cruise to the north.

For the second time during the war weather conditions favored the Blues. No great storm rose this time to scatter the American ships (indeed, a storm at this time would have hurt the Blues worse than their foes), but heavy fogs made the scouting work of the American fleet extremely difficult—and came near working disaster when victory was actually within reach.

As near as could be determined from all possible sources of information, the Blues had evidently decided that the southern base was worth as much protection as the northern, and had divided their naval forces almost equally. This course seemed quite justified, as the American ships were still scattered over so much of the eastern coast, that they could not be gathered for an attack in force for several days, and in this time many things might happen.

The naval situation on the eve of the final campaign was rather complex. The greater part of the Blue fleet was steaming north, well out from the coast. A considerable portion of it was reported to have entered the Gulf and to be moving to protect the Texas base.

Most of the heaviest vessels of the American navy were in southern waters, close behind the Blue fleet, but much nearer to the coast. The rest of the American navy was scattered along the Atlantic seaboard, but there was not sufficient

CLEARING THE SEAS

strength at any one point to repel an attack by the full strength of the Blue fleet.

So, although the plan which the Americans would have preferred to follow was to attack the southern base, destroy the Blue fleet there, then move north with all their forces—this was exactly the thing that they did not dare to do. They dared not leave so great a stretch of coast unprotected; the bulk of their ships must keep within striking distance of the main Blue fleet.

At the same time, there was great need of destroying the Texas base with all possible speed, for commercial, rather than military reasons. The South, being to a large extent an agricultural community, was suffering more heavily from the presence of an armed force in its midst than was the North.

The Americans first made an attempt to intercept the Blue Gulf squadron, but this attempt failed for reasons which were afterward only too clear.

It was then decided to send a small fleet of heavy vessels to the Gulf without awaiting the issue of the struggle for the northern base.

Six ships were detached from the American squadron which was steaming north, while five others were ordered from different eastern ports. It was thought that this arrangement would insure a better patrol of the coast while the shifting of forces was being made than to send all the ships of the newly created Gulf squadron from one point.

THE NEW PHASE

Among the vessels sent to southern waters was the *Porto Rico*, upon which repairs had been rushed at a speed which broke all records of the Brooklyn yard.

Joe and Ted welcomed the chance for immediate service, little guessing that they were to witness the working of the last and cleverest of the Blue ruses, and to take a more spectacular part than they dreamed in the final event of the war.

XXXV

THE "BOLTURA"

AGAIN the *Porto Rico* slipped out of port, but her departure this time was a different thing from the triumphant passage down Delaware Bay. That trip had been made in broad daylight, with cheering crowds lining every available inch of standing-room. Now the great ship left the navy-yard, crossed the choppy waters into which she had made so spectacular an entrance a short time before, and passed through the Narrows under cover of darkness and slashed by a savage sleet-storm from the north.

Speed was again the thing that counted, and the crew of the *Porto Rico* were thankful that the vessel's engines were as powerful as her guns.

Sticking rather close to the shore, and exchanging wireless messages with it whenever possible, the battle-ship steamed steadily southward, ever watchful for the first sign of the Blue fleet which was moving in the other direction.

Rough weather was encountered, but the *Porto Rico* ran into no storms of sufficient violence to

THE "BOLTURA"

drive her out of her course, or even greatly to reduce her speed.

No event of any sort occurred to break the monotony of the trip. No ships were sighted except a few vessels of the patrol, and four or five scudding merchant-vessels which had slipped out the instant a break had come in the Blue blockade.

Joe Lawton was making the best possible use of the hours of the night at the end of the third day out. It had been a busy day (as practically all days are busy days on shipboard) and he had been glad to get into his hammock long before taps sounded. It seemed to him that he had not been asleep for more than a minute when he felt some one shaking him by the shoulder.

He sat up in his hammock, to find the deck in utter darkness. He could not see the hammock next him, nor make out familiar objects which he knew were within a few feet of him.

"General quarters!" whispered a voice in his ear.

Perfect training bore fruit that night. In the dark ship men stumbled and groped their way to their posts with as little confusion as possible. It took longer than usual, of course, but before many minutes had elapsed the officers of the different divisions began to report every man in his place.

There had been no suggestion as to the cause of this silent and ghostly hurrying to quarters,

CLEARING THE SEAS

yet every man on board knew what had happened as well as though he had been told.

Joe, standing close to the breech of a 7-inch gun in the port battery, leaned forward and peered out a chink in the battle-port. Presently he saw in the distance exactly what he had expected to see—a faint cluster of bobbing lights, some white, some of different colors.

They were so far away that they were mere spots of brightness, but nobody needed to ask what they were. The *Porto Rico* and the great Blue fleet were passing each other!

For nearly two hours the American war-ship lay with silent engines and extinguished lights, drifting, with men on the sounding-boards using the lead.

Whether or not the ship had been sighted by the Blues could not be determined, but it was evident that the enemy believed they had no time or ammunition to waste in the pursuit of single vessels, for the distant lights continued to twinkle past in an unbroken line, and at the end of the long wait the *Porto Rico* resumed her journey, her wireless carrying to the shore the news of what she had seen.

From this point, the journey proceeded without incident. Off the Florida coast, the *Porto Rico* joined the other ten ships of the Gulf squadron, arriving within a few hours of her schedule time, and the entire fleet rounded the Florida Keys and entered the Gulf.

THE "BOLTURA"

Very cautiously they pushed forward, for less was known of this southern base than of the northern. The course of events during the war had been such that no attack had been made by the Americans against this point. Their land forces, outnumbered and beaten from the outset, had never got within striking distance of it, while there had been no time at which a sufficient naval force could be spared for the attack.

With the water ahead of them raked by the small vessels as by the teeth of a great steel rake, the battle-ships steamed forward at reduced speed. They had come not merely to defeat the Blue ships, but to batter down the land defenses, cut off the Blue army from its supplies, and free the South from the weight of invasion. No chances must be taken!

Such information regarding the Blue base as the Americans possessed made their task seem a difficult one. The Blues had selected an excellent position, where shoal water prevented the near approach of ships, save by certain channels, and the position had been defended by numerous batteries provided with guns of large caliber.

The entire chances of success seemed to hinge on the number of ships in the Blue fleet—and this piece of information was shrouded in mystery.

Hour after hour the Gulf squadron pushed forward, and the scout-ships in front sent back word that there were no signs of the foe.

This continued absence of the foe was baffling.

CLEARING THE SEAS

It was not like the Blues to refuse battle where there seemed anything like a chance of victory.

"I don't like the looks of things at all," Joe told Ted at a hurried noon meal during the crossing of the Gulf. "When you don't find the Blues in the place where they ought to be you can make up your mind they're somewhere that's going to prove mighty unpleasant for you!"

"Oh, I don't think there's anything strange about it," answered Ted. "They're going to fight in shoal water where they'll have the support of their land-batteries. It's just what we would do if the positions were reversed."

"Maybe so," admitted Joe, "but somebody ought to have seen more of their fleet. Of course, the Gulf is a big piece of water, and a war-ship doesn't take up much of its surface, but it strikes me as queer that nobody has seen anything."

As though to prove Joe's fears groundless, there came a sudden hail of, "Smoke ho!" from the lookout. A few seconds later everybody not on duty had crowded to the deck.

It was soon apparent that the approaching ship was not a war-ship, and shortly afterward the *Porto Rico* was exchanging signals with one of the fleet scout-ships, the *Wasp*, which reported that she was bringing in a prize.

"There," Ted said, triumphantly, to Joe, "I hope that satisfies you that the Blues are where we want 'em!"

Sure enough, the prize was brought in half an

THE "BOLTURA"

hour later. It proved to be a tubby ship's tender, little more than a launch, bearing across its stern the name of one of the largest Blue battle-ships, and having on board three or four officers and a dozen sailors.

The prisoners were taken at once on board the flag-ship, and the squadron went on at reduced speed while they were being questioned by the Admiral and his officers.

In spite of all he had seen, Joe could not shake off a restless feeling that all was not as it should be, and that there was a shock of some sort in store for the fleet. Knowing that Ted did not share his beliefs (and, indeed, had little patience with them), Joe made no effort to talk with him, but leaned against a stanchion near one of the forward turrets and did a few minutes' hard thinking.

Over and over again there kept dancing through his mind the name of the ship which had been painted across the stern of the captured tender.

"*Boltura!*" he kept saying to himself, "*Boltura!* Now why should that name mean something to me?"

For a while he pondered this without arriving at any conclusion, then abruptly he knew exactly why the name had impressed him. Never to his knowledge had he laid eyes on that particular ship. It might have been among those vessels which the Submarine "X" had vainly tried to torpedo, but it had certainly not been among the conquerors

CLEARING THE SEAS

of the *Alaska* nor one of those ships which had fought the *Porto Rico* and the monitors almost within sight of New York's sky-scrapers.

But for all that Joe was perfectly familiar with the *Boltura's* appearance. He had seen a picture of it in an illustrated weekly during the time he had spent on shore training recruits. The remarkable thing about the ship was that instead of a single mast forward, or one forward and one aft, she carried three masts, one being placed amidships between the two pairs of short, squat funnels.

Furthermore, these three masts, for reasons known only to the Blue designer, came down from bow to stern, the forward mast being the highest and the rear mast the lowest.

At the sight of the name *Boltura* on the stern of the captured tender Joe's mind had flashed back to the night when he had watched the distant Blue ships go slowly past the chink in the *Porto Rico's* battle-port. At that time he had marked one trio of lights whose even rate of speed showed that they were all on the same vessel, and whose positions were just about those which the masthead lights of the queerly constructed *Boltura* would occupy.

Joe's hand struck his leg with a mighty thump.

"I'll bet my head," he exclaimed, "that the *Boltura* is no more in the Gulf of Mexico than it is in the Red Sea!"

Of course, Joe was nothing but a young sailor,

THE "BOLTURA"

and his theory was nothing more than guesswork, but, granting that his first guess had been correct, some other things were easy to explain.

"A tender from a big ship would be just the sort of bait they'd leave behind them," he thought, "and every foot they can draw us into the Gulf gives them that much more time for their operations along the coast."

He hurried out on deck with the wild idea of going at once to Captain Edmands with his suspicions, but he had not taken a dozen steps aft before he abandoned this idea.

It was hardly likely that Captain Edmands and his officers would have overlooked things that he saw, or fail to attach significance to such things as the lights of distant ships!

Even while he stood hesitating, Captain Edmands's figure appeared on the bridge, signal-flags fluttered up the halyards, and the bugles commenced sounding "quarters."

"In another minute," muttered Joe as he hurried to his post, "I might have made a fool of myself!"

XXXVI

"STOLE AWAY!"

NEVER was attack made with greater caution than that of the Gulf squadron on the southern base of the Blues. It was late afternoon, and the water was smooth. Far off on the sky-line the Texas coast loomed a dim, grayish-brown line.

The ships were spread out in a long line, behind which hovered the scout-ships, which abandoned their advanced position once the serious fighting threatened to commence.

Every ship was provided with pilots picked up from different Gulf ports, for it was feared that the Blues might take refuge in the shallow water close to shore, and men who knew the channels were needed to take the great war-ships in as far as they dared go.

At five o'clock in the afternoon, all the scout-ships but one had reported. The reports they had brought had been vague enough, indicating, as they did, a strange inactivity on the part of the foe, but making it absolutely certain that a large

“STOLE AWAY!”

number of Blue ships were now within a few miles of the fleet's position.

Some anxiety was felt over the continued absence of the missing scout-ship *Cumberland*. The vessel had been the private yacht of a millionaire, converted into an auxiliary vessel. She was very fast and, moreover, commanded by a young lieutenant named Pierce, who had already made himself a reputation for gallantry that was very close to foolhardiness. The great fleet held back while they waited for the coming of the *Cumberland*.

It struck Joe as rather queer as he stood waiting at the breech of the big 7-inch gun that was now under his charge.

“After all,” he thought, “we make war pretty much in the same old way. For all our wireless and aeroplanes and submarines, here we are waiting for information that a brave man in an ordinary steamer has gone out to find!”

For nearly an hour the Admiral held the great ships of his fleet in check, while officers from the bridge of every vessel scanned the waters anxiously for the first smudge of smoke that would tell them that the *Cumberland* was coming, or strained their ears for the roar of guns that would mean a different ending to the dashing lieutenant's venture.

Just as the brilliant sunset colors were beginning to grow dim, the *Cumberland* was sighted, headed back for the fleet with “a bone in her teeth,”

CLEARING THE SEAS

the smoke from her single funnel making a broad, flat band of black across the water behind her.

There were no formalities connected with Pierce's report. The *Cumberland* headed straight for the *Porto Rico*, signaling that she would pass between that ship and the *Kansas*, and hardly waiting for the Admiral's permission to do so.

No boats were lowered, and there was no secrecy about the message which Pierce's strong young voice carried across the water to the white-clad figure on the bridge of the flag-ship.

Joe Lawton, leaning out from behind the wall of steel that protected his gun, could look down at the trim shape of the tiny *Cumberland*—a mere cockle-shell alongside the huge battle-ship—and could hear every word of her commander's report.

"I've located the Blue fleet, sir," Pierce's voice sounded clearly above the low wash of the waves and the puffing of the exhausts on the two ships. "It consists of three gunboats, one with a hole in her bottom, and eight transports and colliers on which they've rigged up dummy masts!"

There was an instant of shocked silence. Joe could distinctly hear the breathing of the men of his gun-crew. Then a voice from the bridge hailed the *Cumberland*.

"What of the land defenses?" went the question.

"Empty," came the reply. "Their base is there, all right, but it appears to be completely deserted. We saw no evidences that either the

“STOLE AWAY!”

fortifications or the supply camps were occupied, and all the ships seemed deserted.”

The silence which had followed Pierce's first remark continued. Men looked at each other and shook their heads without speaking. The thing staggered belief, but there could be no doubt of the facts.

The Gulf squadron had steamed several hundred miles to capture a few abandoned wrecks and the refuse of a huge, empty camp. Such Blue ships as had been in the Gulf were on their way north, and the Blue army of the South, deliberately cutting itself off from all communication, had buried itself in a hostile country, risking everything on a mad dash for the eastern coast!

The last ruse of the Blues, like their first, had been positively dazzling in its bewildering suddenness!

XXXVII

A FAMILIAR FACE

IT was several days after the fiasco at the southern base, and the Gulf squadron—every man in which, from the Admiral down, was fairly “biting nails” over the fashion in which they had been tricked—was retracing its long course, expecting every hour to receive word that the great sea-fight in the North had become a part of naval history, and that they had been left out of it.

Joe, coming up from the protective deck where he had been arguing with one of the ship’s artificers over the repairs necessary to the elevating-screw of his gun, passed by that portion of the spar-deck which was given over to the Blue prisoners who had been taken from the ship’s tender.

He noticed a group of them squatting on the floor, cheerfully absorbed in a game of cards, and started to pass on, when some one called to him.

“Hello!” called a cheerful voice in the precise English which could not be mistaken for the speech of an American. “Was it you and the red-headed man who got out of the prison pen?”

Joe turned and found himself face to face with

A FAMILIAR FACE

the bearded Blue sailor who had talked to him on board the *Aroton* after the *Alaska* had been beaten.

"Yes," Joe answered, laughing, "we were the ones that got out. What do you think of the war now? Have you changed your mind since we talked together last?"

They had moved a little to one side of the group that was playing cards, and were out of earshot both of the Blues and of the members of the crew.

The Blue sailor stopped smiling and turned wholly serious.

"Well, yes," he admitted, "I have changed my mind. And yet, if the war were to begin again to-morrow, I should feel just as I did when I told you that we would win. It is just as true to-day as it was then that you Americans know nothing about war as we have learned it."

"But you admit that you can't possibly win," Joe insisted.

"That is true," answered the other, "we cannot possibly win. I suppose there will be more fighting, because that is the nature of my people—to fight on until they can fight no longer. But it is not merely that we have failed in what we started out to do; we have made a bigger mistake than that."

"I don't understand," Joe said, doubtfully.

"Maybe you will have to be a few years older before you can understand," the Blue told him.

CLEARING THE SEAS

Maybe, because you are an American, you will never understand at all as we do.

"But the truth of it all is that the world is through with war. After this is all over, your people will not have to worry over ships and guns to protect your coast. You will never be called upon to drive back another invasion. It is just as useless and foolish for men to go to war now as it would be for them to throw away their electric lights and go to burning candles.

"A few hundred years ago, a nation went to war to get what it could not gain in any other way. Wars were not always right; they were very often unjust. And men have grown so much wiser and happier and better than they were hundreds of years ago, that wars are just as much worse.

"The stronger nation can no longer conquer the weaker. We Blues have spent our lives learning to fight, yet we could not beat you. You knew nothing of war except how to build guns and ships. We could win battles, but that is no longer enough. Nowadays, a whole people must be beaten, and you are too great a people for that.

"Americans and Blues will be better for what has happened. You have shown yourselves and the world that no other war will ever have to be feared and endured. And we have proved to ourselves that we have wasted time and money in learning to fight better than anything else. Ours will be a different country now. Men will

A FAMILIAR FACE

not have to spend all their best years in the army and navy, and money will be spent for better things than guns and ships."

He nodded to Joe with another good-natured smile, and turned back to watch the card-game.

Joe walked back to his gun very thoughtfully. It had never occurred to him to think of the war as the Blue had spoken of it, or to dream that this was to be the last war that the world would see. He wondered, as he bent over the elevating-screw of the gun, if the Blue sailor was right.

The next morning the American fleet heard a piece of news that made Joe completely forget his sober talk with the Blue captive. The Blue southern army, which had broken away from its great base and made a wild dash forward in the hope of either reaching the eastern coast where it could get into communication with its ships, or striking clear through the central part of the country until it met the Blue army of the North, had been surrounded by the Americans and captured.

If anything had been needed to make the ultimate defeat of the Blues absolutely certain, this capture of the southern army accomplished it. The whole force of the American armies could now be turned to the North, where the Blues, victorious, but facing a task that grew harder with every day that passed, had already given up holding captured Pittsfield or moving southeast upon New York City.

CLEARING THE SEAS

"They'll give up now," Ted said, confidently. "Before we get to Cape Hatteras we'll hear that the Blue fleet has surrendered and the war's over."

"Or that there's been a big battle off the Maine coast and we've missed it," added Joe.

But Ted had guessed wrong, and Joe had taken it for granted that all the Blues realized the hopelessness of prolonging the struggle as did the man who had talked to him.

As the *Porto Rico* and the other ships of the squadron steamed north, day followed day and they heard no report that peace had been declared. Nor did they have the more unwelcome news that the last battle had been fought without them.

When they had passed the Virginia coast the spirits of the men rose, and when the famous blue flag with "Remember the *Alaska*" in white letters upon it went to the foretop of the flagship, they believed that they were to see one more fight before the last gun of the war was fired.

XXXVIII

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

NOT until years afterward did Joe Lawton (and thousands of other men on board the American fleet) realize the splendid uselessness of that last fight. To them at the time it was but the glorious end to one of the strangest, shortest, and most terrible wars of history.

It was fought simply and purely because the Blues were a warlike race of people, whose pride in their military achievements was greater than any other consideration, and who would not acknowledge themselves beaten until the last possible chance of victory had passed.

They might have saved millions of dollars and hundreds of lives by giving up the struggle and suing for peace while the remnants of their great navy still lay at anchor close to the coast of Maine, and while the fragments of their northern army were still something more than a mass of fugitives. But they preferred to fight to the last ditch!

It was a clear, cold morning when the ships of the Gulf squadron came in sight of the other vessels of the American fleet, spread out in a great

CLEARING THE SEAS

steel cordon between the Blue fleet and the open sea.

To the men of the ships which had taken part in the southern expedition the inactivity of their companions in the North was unexplained. They knew only that by an almost unbelievable stroke of good luck they were to be "in at the death," after all. But that the Blues should wait while every day might bring more American ships for them to face seemed very strange—and very much against the usual policy of the foe.

The officers of the fleet; however, understood. They knew that the Blue ships were waiting in the hope that their army, bravely striving to cut their way through foes that outnumbered them two to one and hemmed them in on every side, might reach the coast.

Not until he saw the distant ships of the watching fleet had Joe realized what a tremendous battle this last sea-fight was to be. As far as he could see in both directions stretched the line of the American fleet, and Joe knew that all the vessels were not in sight.

Compared with this fight, the naval battles of the Russo-Japanese War, the Turco-Italian—even the battles of the present struggle which had already occurred—would be mere skirmishes.

It was more than fleet against fleet; it was almost the navy of one country against the navy of another! Nearly one hundred ships and more than seventy-five thousand men would be engaged!

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

For two days after the fleets united, and the full strength of the Americans was gathered, the blockading squadron moved about this way and that. The arrangement of the ships was changed; the newly arrived vessels were given their places in line, and the plan of battle was altered to suit the changed conditions.

Yet the hours dragged on, and the Blues did not come out. It began to look as though they preferred to fight with their backs to a hostile coast, waiting until the last minute for the coming of their harassed army, rather than to come out and fight in the open sea.

On the morning of the third day came the order to weigh anchor, and the great flotilla commenced to move. Accustomed as he was to the spectacle of great fleets moving into battle, Joe could not help being moved by what he could see from the deck of the flag-ship.

Moving in a great double crescent that was more than twenty miles from tip to tip, the mighty fleet steamed in toward the coast. Some of the battle-ships and cruisers in the long line were fighting their first fight with the Blues; others bore the scars of past encounters, like the *Porto Rico*. Still other ships there were which were not in the long steel line. Some of them had gone down; others, little better than wrecks, lay in dry-dock at the different navy-yards.

It seemed to Joe, as the fleet moved forward to battle, that the Blues would never come, and he

CLEARING THE SEAS

began to think that perhaps, after all, they had given up, and that they would resign the struggle without a fight.

Then, far off on the horizon, showing only as a tiny smudge of darker color against the faint gray line of the coast, he saw what he knew must be the smoke from Blue ships.

Instantly there arose on every side the clanging of bells, blowing of bugles, and tooting of whistles. In response to fluttering signals the ships changed their positions, the more powerful battle-ships pushing forward into the front line, their weaker sisters falling back into the second line, which would act as reserve.

Slowly the tiny cloud of smoke to the west grew in size, broadened until it was a band of black against the blue sky, then broke into smaller pieces as the hostile ships spread out to meet the attack.

Those battles in which Joe had taken part had all been more or less naval freaks. They had been fights in which, for one reason or another, the usual methods had not been followed, and had been won or lost by tactics not mentioned in the text-books.

Now, as the Blue fleet began to take on form, he expected to see the hostile forces go tearing straight for each other, every gun banging. Instead of this the fleets began shifting ground, changing formation, dodging about like boxers before a shot had been fired.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Then, at what must have been almost the maximum range for the big guns, the battle opened with a sudden bellowing thunder from the southern end of the Blue line.

So far apart were the hostile ships that it was hard to believe that they were actually engaged. The battle-ships at which the *Porto Rico* was firing were no more than black spots on the blue water, the ships at the other end of the long line of battle were not even visible!

As yet there was nothing for the guns of the broadside batteries to do. Until one side or the other began to gain an advantage, and to close in on its weakening foe, the fighting would be done by the big fellows in the turrets.

Minutes dragged into hours. From the sighting-hood, Joe could catch glimpses of the *Washington*, the *Michigan*, and the *Kansas*, their turret-guns flashing, the ships themselves half hidden by a blanket of yellow-brown gases, the water about them spouting up from the bursting shells of their distant foes.

He had glanced at his watch when the first guns were fired, and noticed that it was seven minutes past nine. At half past ten the appearance of the battle had not changed noticeably. The American ships which Joe could see were still hammering away, apparently no worse off than at the beginning of the action, and the enemy's ships were still no more than black dots!

Whether or not the *Porto Rico* had been hit

CLEARING THE SEAS

he could not tell. No shells had struck the gun-deck; he had seen no wounded men carried to the dreaded operating-rooms below.

"This ain't a battle!" he heard a gunner mutter to his companion; "it's nothing more than target-practice!"

Eleven o'clock, noon—and to Joe's astonishment mess-call was sounded. Relief crews went to the turrets, and the sweating, powder-blackened gunners came from their guns. Dinner was served on the decks, and the men ate from tin dishes, for the swinging tables and every scrap of crockery had gone overboard.

"Of course we don't know we've been in a fight!" one of the gunners from a forward turret exclaimed in answer to the chaffing of one of his companions; "they aren't firing at us. It's the *Kansas* they're after. And I'll bet it's hot enough farther to the north!"

Joe began to understand. The Blues were following their usual tactics, concentrating the fire of several ships on one of their foes—and the *Porto Rico's* turn had not come! Somewhere along that chain of steel ships that stretched out of sight to the north, the Blues were massing their strength in an effort to smash through and break in among the weaker ships of the second line!

For two weary hours after dinner the dull hammering of the cannonade continued; then there began a vast movement to the north.

Like a huge belt, driven around invisible pulleys

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

by all the throbbing engines of the ships which composed it, the American fleet began circling past its foe, each ship using all its guns as long as it was in range, then turning and giving place to the next exactly as they did on the range.

The position of the *Porto Rico* had been almost at the southern end of the long line. Not until she had steamed several miles to the north did Joe realize what had been happening behind all that low thunder of guns to the north.

As the ship gathered speed and forged ahead, clusters and groups of Blue war-ships began to appear, some almost "hull down" in the distance, others much closer to the circling Americans.

Then Joe understood! Like a rock the Admiral had kept the great fleet stationary while the Blues attacked, and like a rock the line had withstood the attack. This bunching of Blue war-ships was not the result of design on the part of the foe; they had been hammered out of shape by the incessant, steady, overwhelming long-range bombardment which they had had to endure for hours.

And now that the Blue attack had burned itself out, the counter-attack was being hurled home. But instead of a wild rush, with each ship singling out its foe and rushing to close quarters, it was this steady, merciless circling, every circle coming closer, that was doing the deadly work.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the broadside batteries of the *Porto Rico* came into action for

CLEARING THE SEAS

the first time, their target being a huddle of Blue battle-ships and cruisers—six in all—steaming slowly away from them at a distance of perhaps four miles.

"It's time they let us at 'em!" shouted a gunner as the 7-inch rifle roared out its first shot and flung its great weight back against the recoil-cylinders.

Joe smiled as he watched the gun-pointer shifting the piece slightly in response to the call of the man in the sighting-hood. Half an hour before, Joe would have echoed the man's words. For hours he had been chafing at the forced inactivity, wondering what sort of a fight it was that left half of a ship's strength silent and seemingly useless.

Now he knew what a great sailor it was who commanded the fleet from the bridge of the flag-ship. The Admiral had fought his battle, not with a single ship, not with a few of his most powerful battle-ships, but *with his whole fleet!*

He had divided the work of battering the foe among his ships, and he had so manoeuvred that each Blue war-ship was for ever facing fresh foes.

He had fought just the sort of a fight that the enemy did not want! They had longed to come to grips, to force the fighting, and the Admiral had kept them at long range, slugging them methodically to bits.

It seemed to Joe, as he stared out across the water, that the great fight was over.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

"I've had a mighty small part in it," he said to himself, "but I guess I've seen the greatest naval battle in history!"

But Joe and every other man in the American fleet made the same mistake. The battle seemed at an end, but only half of it had been fought. The mechanical side of the fight, which had to do with armor-plate and shells, had gone against the Blues. Ship for ship and gun for gun they had been overmatched and beaten.

The men of the Blue fleet, however, were still unconquered. So long as there was breath in their bodies, and some shreds of deck planking under their feet, they would go on. They were all that was left of the splendid fighting forces of the greatest military nation under the sun; they would not stop while flesh and blood might still wrest victory out of defeat!

XXXIX

THE FORLORN HOPE

MILE after mile the great steel wheel of war-ships had circled, driving the foe relentlessly before it. The Blue fleet no longer faced its foe in good order; its solid lines had been broken into groups, as leaves are drifted into piles by the steady winds of November.

Yet suddenly, as though a great wind had in an instant started blowing toward the American fleet, these scattered groups and masses of Blue vessels, many of them limping and lurching under the thrust of crippled engines, others so battered by the bombardment they had endured that they looked like wrecks, came out toward the steel circle that had beaten them!

From his port Joe could not see the whole vast sweep of this great charge of the "forlorn hope," but he saw enough of it to understand the wonderful bravery of the thing. He saw two ships, so badly off that not more than a third of their guns were working, wheel into line and come stubbornly forward.

An officer behind him gave a sharp exclama-

THE FORLORN HOPE

tion, and then spoke to the men of Joe's gun-crew in a low voice.

"You men may live to be a million, but you'll see nothing like that again!" he exclaimed. "That's the sort of men we have to beat!"

History is full of the accounts of such wonderful charges, where an indomitable spirit has carried men forward when to go forward seemed a human impossibility. Paul Jones did it when he sank the *Serapis* after his own ship had been riddled under his feet, Pickett's men did it when they charged across the open fields at Gettysburg, the French cavalry did it at Waterloo when they charged clear to and into the British squares after the sunken road had broken their formation and scattered their squadrons.

And now the battered vessels of the Blue fleet added another glorious, hopeless charge to history!

A few minutes before, the din of firing had been dying away. Now it broke our afresh and with renewed volume. For the first time during the engagement Joe and his men were able to serve their gun as fast as they could perform the operations of loading and firing.

Their target was a limping cruiser, plowing through the water toward them with all the speed she could muster, her few guns flashing as she came.

According to target-range figures, the *Porto Rico* should have destroyed the approaching cruiser while she was yet half a mile distant, yet

CLEARING THE SEAS

for all the pelting steel which showered down upon her the Blue ship came on.

It seemed to Joe—for all he knew, that the 7-inch shells were striking home to the mark—that the enemy's ship could not be stopped, that his gun and the other guns which were being fired about him were sending their projectiles, not at the battered hull and decks of the vessel itself, but at the wonderful fighting spirit of the Blues!

"She's sinking!"

"No, she's coming on!"

"They're going to try to board!"

"They'll never get close enough!"

Everybody on the *Porto Rico* seemed shouting at once; then above the confusion of voices sounded the sharp bugles sounding "prepare to repel boarders."

One instant the rushing Blue ship was a distant dark mass on the water, the next she was towering up out of the sea, apparently only a few feet away. Joe caught a confused glimpse of lofty steel plates so full of shot-holes that they looked pock-marked like the cheeks of a smallpox victim, a mast so weakened that it swayed and threatened to fall every instant, guns twisted from their carriages and sticking up into the air at every angle.

He heard the churning of the screws as the *Porto Rico* manœvered to avoid the attack, then came a wild shouting, a terrific crash and grating of steel against steel.

THE FORLORN HOPE

The next instant he found himself on deck, cutlass in hand, and saw the Blue sailors leaping across the narrow aisle of water that separated the two ships.

Outnumbered three to one, the Blues dashed into the fight, not like beaten men making a last desperate charge, but like so many sea-rovers of days that were gone, fighting for the pure love of it.

Down onto the decks of the *Porto Rico* surged the bronzed, bearded figures of the Blues, their officers, clad in their brilliant full-dress uniforms, urging their men on and charging at their head. Mere numbers could not stop such a charge! For a few minutes the wild, headlong bravery of the assailants carried everything before it.

A surging mass of Blues swept the forecastle, and Joe saw a Blue flag, a sharpened spike on the butt of its pole, stuck quivering into the planking of the deck.

For an instant it seemed as though the little band of Blues might accomplish the impossible and win, then a huge wave of white-clad Americans surged back over the forecastle, the Blue flag went down, the knot of blue-clad figures was swallowed up and vanished.

Again and again the Blues swept to the attack, but, although they never succeeded in getting farther than the forecastle of the *Porto Rico*, none of them went back over the rail of their own vessel.

CLEARING THE SEAS

When finally the attacks ceased and the Americans poured into the Blue vessel, they found their capture a deserted ship. The Blue ship was empty; its crew had gone to their death in the forecastle of the ship they could not capture!

XL

THE SURRENDER

ACROSS the dark waters of the harbor, strangely lighted by the crisscrossing beams of a hundred search-lights, and by a red glare from the shore where tons of Blue supplies were being burned, the *Porto Rico* steamed slowly.

Behind her the sea, which had echoed all day long to the thunder of hundreds of great guns, was strangely silent. Nothing could be heard except the exhausts of vessels and the occasional short hoot of a steam-siren or the distant chiming of a ship's bell.

A mile from shore the flag-ship stopped her engines, swung to, and came to anchor with a rattle of chains. "Boats away!" shrilled the pipes, and a few seconds later a little flotilla of boats, the Admiral's cutter in the lead, darted across the dark waters.

Joe, pulling an oar in the third boat, did not guess the significance of this strange manoeuvre. He knew that the greatest sea-fight of all time was over; that all along the unbroken steel cordon of American ships there had raged such fights

CLEARING THE SEAS

as the one in which he had taken part on the deck of the flag-ship.

Out of the darkness ahead of them loomed a dim gray bulk. A whisper passed from lip to lip, from boat to boat, as the dripping oars were lifted.

"The *Alaska*!"

Joe's heart beat fast and seemed trying to get up into his throat as the boats swung in toward the battered sides of the great ship which had been so long in the hands of the foe.

There was no cheering, no excitement. In silence the boats swung up to the vessel's side. The Admiral and some of his officers mounted first; then the men followed. The *Alaska* lay almost as she had been left the day following her capture.

She had no lights of her own, and in the flickering glare of lanterns brought from the flag-ship the Admiral's flag and the blue banner with the white motto under which the *Porto Rico* had fought were hoisted to the stump of the foremast.

An hour of strange, unreal silence followed. The Admiral and his officers sat close to the battered turret, forward, smoking their cigars. The men, relieved of actual duty, gathered in groups and talked in suppressed voices.

From the bay outside came the sounds of many ships in slow, careful motion, the slow puff of exhausts, the questioning toots of whistles as the ships felt their way, then the sharp rattling of

THE SURRENDER

chains through the hawse-pipes as the anchors were let go. The white beams of search-lights moved this way and that. Far to the left red lights showed the location of the grim vessels of the hospital-fleet—a sight at which Joe and his companions did not care to look. In every direction, signal-lights winked and flickered.

Far into the night the Admiral and his officers sat smoking by the ruined turrets, then, in response to some signal that came flickering to them out of the night, they arose, threw away the stumps of their cigars, and formed themselves in a compact group, the Admiral standing slightly in advance.

The men, summoned by bugle-calls, were formed in line as though for inspection. From the darkened water came the steady beat of oars.

In a flash Joe understood what was happening. The Admiral would receive the surrender of the Blue officers, not in the glare of day on the deck of the flag-ship, but under the cloak of night on the deck of the old *Alaska*! It was at once a fit and a considerate end of a great struggle.

Presently the Blue officers began to appear on the deck. They did not look like captives. Every man of the big, bearded sea-fighters moved across the deck toward the waiting group with head erect and firm tread.

Joe was not close enough to hear what was said, but he saw that the Americans awaited the approach of their vanquished foes with bared

CLEARING THE SEAS

heads, and that the Admiral returned the proffered swords.

For the second time that night a big lump came into Joe Lawton's throat. For long, weary months all his energies and those of his countrymen had been centered in the struggle against these big, fearless Blues. The long struggle was over. America had emerged triumphant, the Blues were beaten. But as he watched the solemn ceremony on the battered forecastle all Joe's feeling of triumph was swallowed up in a great wave of pity for the beaten officers and men.

They were the greatest fighting race on earth; their pride in their army and navy had been above everything else. They had considered themselves invincible! And now they had to suffer the humiliation of a defeat so complete that it had well-nigh stripped them of every shred of their vast power.

"I'm sorry we whipped them!" he confessed to himself. "I wish it might have been any other nation on earth!"

XLI

MR. SHARPE CONFESSES

"YOU'RE off duty for an hour, Lawton," one of the ship's yeomen said to Joe the morning after the *Porto Rico* steamed into New York harbor. "Somebody on deck to see you."

As Joe came on deck he caught sight of his uncle's slender, white-haired figure. Stephen Sharpe looked much older than on the day of that strange interview with Joe in his office.

"Stand still and let me look at you!" commanded Mr. Sharpe as Joe appeared.

Joe obeyed, smiling, and the old man looked him over from head to foot. Then he sighed, stepped forward, and shook hands.

"Yes," he said, simply, "you've come through the mill all right, Joe, and you've taken a big load off my mind. When I got your message telling me you were going into the navy I let you go, and then thought I'd made a mistake. And when this war came on I moved heaven and earth to get hold of you and get you out. Of course, I couldn't do that, but I've done what I could to keep track of you. There were times

CLEARING THE SEAS

when I thought— But I want to hear all about it."

They leaned against the ship's rail, and Joe told the long story from beginning to end. Mr. Sharpe nodded soberly when the story was done.

"You were still a boy when you walked out of my office that day," he said, "but you're a man now." He paused and stood staring down at the water. "What are you and your chum Ted Brandt going to do now?" he asked. "Stick to the navy?"

"No," answered Joe, "I don't think we are."

"What will you do then?"

"Well, sir," admitted Joe, "I don't quite know. Ted and I aren't much better off than we were the day we enlisted. We have learned no trade, we've done nothing really to fit ourselves for earning more money than we did before we went into the navy. But we've learned something, for all that. I know I'm going to be something better than a plumber or a mechanic. I'm not afraid to tackle things. Of course, we've more than a year still to serve. When that's over, it 'll be time to think about something else."

"I guess I can do something about having that year shortened," answered Mr. Sharpe. "I think you and Ted are men enough to go it alone just as you stand and make a success of life, but there's no need of it. My business is a big one. I need young men, men who've learned to stand on their own feet. But I want trained men. We won't have to talk of that red automobile

MR. SHARPE CONFESSES

I promised you once, but we are going to talk of college. It's what you and Ted Brandt need to make full-sized men of you. You can go through college now and appreciate what you're getting. If I'd sent you a year and a half ago, you'd have wasted your time."

"But—" Joe began.

His uncle interrupted him with a chuckle. "Oh, I know!" he laughed. "You're mighty independent. Well, never mind the money. You can repay it when you're earning enough. I won't take a refusal, Joe! I practised regular story-book cruelty on you when you came to me. I thought you were spoiled, and I wanted to see if your own legs would carry you. I've done just half my duty by you. Now you've got to let me do the other half."

"That's an easy promise for me to make, uncle," Joe said.

"Very well," answered Mr. Sharpe. "Now we'll consider that settled."

Not many weeks later, Joe and Ted stood on the deck of the *Porto Rico*, staring across the water at the lights of Brooklyn, and the white glare from the great city across the bridge. It was their last night on shipboard. Mr. Sharpe had been as good as his word, and had set in motion the wheels which had brought about their honorable discharge from the navy a year before their period of enlistment would have ended.

CLEARING THE SEAS

"You ought not to hesitate about accepting your discharge at this time," Joe's uncle had written him. "If Uncle Sam had had more use for you at this time than I have, I would not have suggested such a thing. But the war is over. This country has lost lives and money. What the government wants now is young men to build up the nation's prosperity. The United States is going to be a vastly bigger country than it was before the war, and young men like you are going to be of much greater value in other lines of work than you will be keeping the ships of the navy from rotting. Those ships have done a noble work, but it is ended."

Joe and Ted had talked the matter over between themselves, and had come to the conclusion that Mr. Sharpe was right. But the ties that bound them to the navy were very strong, and they had gone frankly to the *Porto Rico's* Captain with their problem.

To their joy, he had agreed heartily with Mr. Sharpe.

"I don't like to lose men that have gone through the war under my command," he said, kindly, "but I'm too good an officer, I hope, to say 'stay' just because you've enlisted to serve three years. As your uncle says, you'll be worth more to the country learning his business on shore than you will be in the navy. You are a lucky pair; I wish every man on the *Porto Rico* had your chance!"

MR. SHARPE CONFESSES

But even after their decision had been reached, and the last twinges of conscience had vanished, leaving was no simple matter. Much as they longed for the new things which lay before them, it was hard to give up the old. Two years before, the navy had been no more than a name to them. During the months which had passed they had become parts of it and they had grown to love every detail of the life.

They said good-by to their comrades, and, sailor-fashion, joked and laughed through the ordeal to hide their real feelings.

A few hours, now, would see the end of their service. Ted was to go straight to his home in Minnesota, Joe was to join his uncle in Oregon. Both of them were to enter an Eastern college the following autumn.

"Well," Ted said, drawing a long breath, "it's over, Joe!"

"Yes," agreed Joe, "and there's more over than we probably think. I believe that Blue sailor that talked to me was right. I believe this is the end of all wars. I don't know that I could bring myself to leave the navy if I thought there was a possibility of more fighting.

"But the United States will never have to fight again. We have beaten the Blues, and that means that we're safe for all time from any attacks. And this war has taught the whole world that fighting doesn't pay."

"I suppose you're right," Ted said, "but way

CLEARING THE SEAS

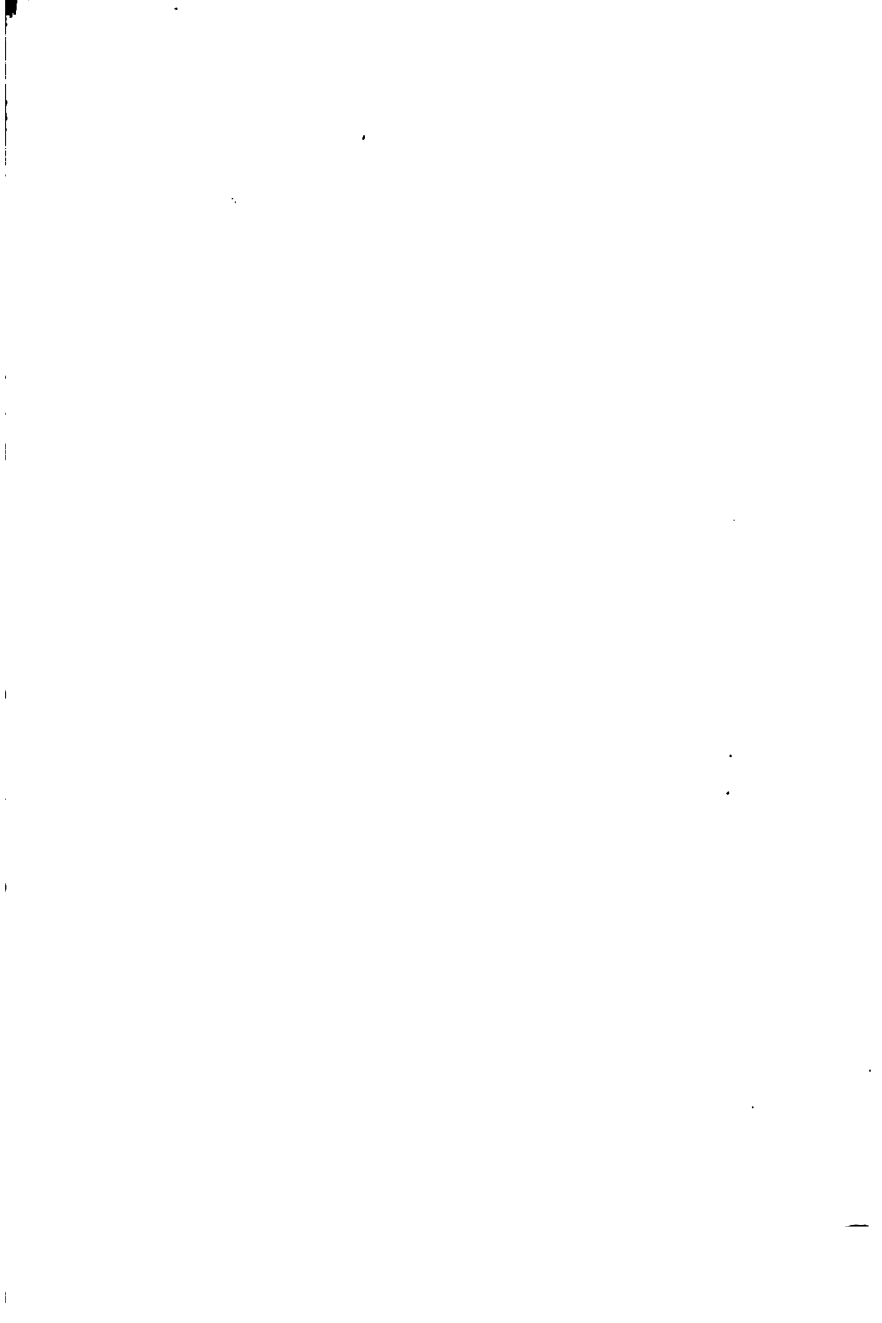
down in the bottom of my heart I can't help being sorry."

"I know it," answered Joe. "We're sailors to the end of our days, Ted. It's got into our blood. Whatever we may do in the future, we'll never feel quite the same as we do now, with the deck of the old ship under our feet!"

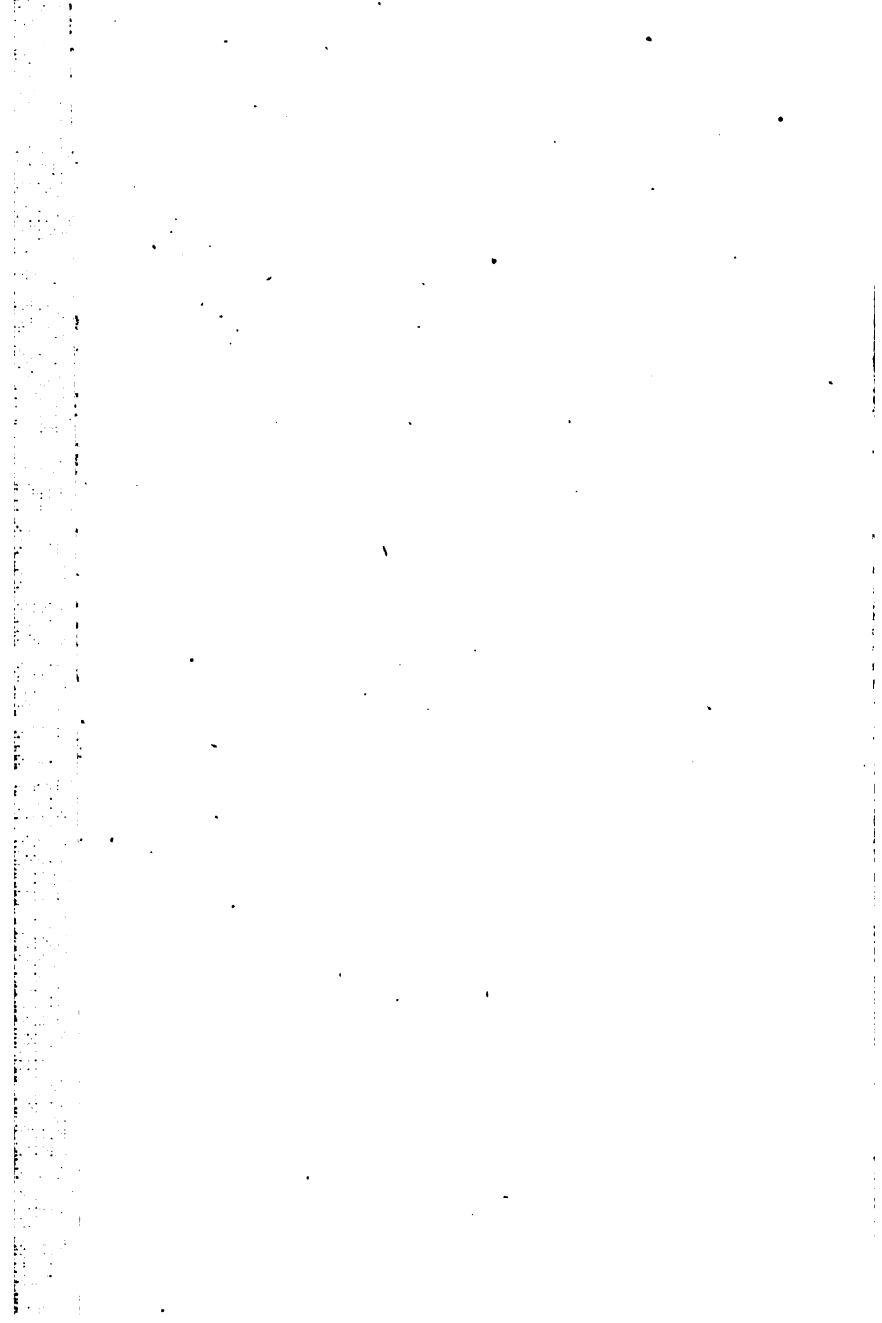
They stood for half an hour, staring down in silence at the water, too full of thoughts to talk. Then the ship's bugles began softly sounding "taps," and very soberly and thoughtfully the two turned away from the rail to climb into their hammocks for the last time.

THE END

mb







**This book is under no circumstances to be
taken from the Building**

[illegible]

